

**COCKNEY PLOTS: WORKING CLASS POLITICS AND GARDEN  
ALLOTMENTS IN LONDON'S EAST END, 1890-1918**

A Thesis Submitted to the College  
Of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History  
University of Saskatchewan

Elizabeth Anne Scott

## **PERMISSION TO USE**

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Arts Degree in the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department of History. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 5A5

## **ABSTRACT**

The allotments scheme was a complex and diverse social, political, and economic movement that provided the labouring classes with small plots of land, usually no larger than one-eighth of an acre, on which to grow vegetables. From the late nineteenth century to the end of the First World War in 1918, the East End of London experienced an overwhelming increase in allotment cultivation and provision. Working-class men in the boroughs of Hackney, Poplar, East Ham, and West Ham participated in the allotments scheme for a variety of reasons. Allotments were places in which a working man could grow his own food with his family's help to supplement low, casual or seasonal wages, and his gardening kept him out of the pub and on the land. During the war period, food prices increased to intolerable levels in the East End so that the allotment was one of the few ways to reasonably feed the family, especially for the casual dockers. East Enders maintained personal and collective connections to the land that they had lost both through the Enclosure Acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the urban sprawl of the early twentieth century. Finally, allotment gardening provided the healthy leisure activities of exercise, horticultural education, and civic participation.

The allotment was embedded in a social ethic that espoused industriousness, sobriety, respectability, and independence and in this way was a middle class solution to a working class problem. Yet, working men adopted the scheme as their own with enthusiasm and dedication and created natural spaces in the degraded landscape of the East End. By 1916, with the passage of the Cultivation of Lands Order, the East End boasted thousands of allotments growing vegetables on London's vacant lots largely due

to the persistent demands of residents on their local borough councils. The allotment association provided East End men with an unparalleled opportunity for grassroots political participation and gave way to a marked increase in working-class political awareness during the period. East Enders gained a foothold in local, regional, metropolitan, and later national politics for the first time in decades. The allotment in the East End also significantly changed the environment in which it was situated. The green space improved the esthetic of the area, adding to the general well-being of all of the boroughs' citizens. East End allotments brought life to an area that many believed was lifeless. Not only did working men prove they could bring their sooty surroundings to life, but that they could also bring back to life the long-latent self-sufficiency of their ancestors. They were attracted to the scheme at a higher rate than many of the other 28 London boroughs because of their poverty, their maintained connection to green space, their cultural and political interest in land, and their profound sense of the loss of the land and the independence it brought.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Professor Christopher Kent for his guidance and knowledge, his continual support and encouragement, and his contagious passion for Victorian history. I am equally indebted to my committee, Professors Gordon DesBrisay and Jim Handy for their many good suggestions and equal encouragement. I would like to thank the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan for their generosity in funding this research. Not only did they award me a Graduate Scholarship in my first year, but funded my trip to England with the Mary Hallett Travel Scholarship and further awarded me the Dr. George Simpson Memorial Scholarship, the Douglas and Merle Bocking Award, and the Buchanan Bounty Trust Book Prize. I would like especially to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the second year of the research. I would also like to thank the College of Graduate Studies and Research, the U of S President's Student Fund, and the Department of History for funding my travel to present parts of this thesis at the Land Questions Conference at the University of Hertfordshire in July of 2005.

The research for this thesis was largely conducted in the United Kingdom and I would like to thank the very helpful staff, archivists and librarians at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library, the Hackney Archives, the Newham Archives, the British Library, the British Newspaper Library at Colindale, and the London Metropolitan Archives. I would also like to thank Professors Jeremy Burchardt (Reading) and Malcolm Chase (Leeds) for their thoughtful suggestions and for taking an interest in my work.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents Peter and Barbara Scott and my husband Chris Harris for their unconditional love and support in this and all of my endeavours. I am forever indebted, literally, to you all.

## **DEDICATION**

For my ‘Grandpop,’ Allotmenteer, Charles Alexander Scott and for my Gran, Annie Jeannette Scott who learned to grow beautiful flowers in Hoxton, East London.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PERMISSION TO USE.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>DEDICATION.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
 <b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
Introduction.....	1
Brief History of Allotments in the United Kingdom.....	3
Allotments in the East End.....	6
Historiography.....	8
Land Reform and Agrarianism.....	13
The Chartist Land Plan.....	18
Intellectual Currents.....	21
Allotments.....	26
 <b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
Green Space in the Eastern Boroughs.....	36
Allotments in the East End, 1890-1916.....	43
1916 and the Cultivation of Lands Order.....	52
The Vacant Land Cultivation Society and the East End.....	53
War Time Allotments, 1917.....	57
Borough of Poplar.....	61
Borough of Hackney.....	65
Boroughs of East Ham and West Ham.....	72
 <b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
Effective Citizens: Becoming Politicized.....	77
East End Allotments Associations.....	78
The Allotments Site.....	92
Essential to the Scheme.....	96
New Relationships: Councillors and Gardeners.....	100
 <b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	 <b>113</b>
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	 <b>125</b>



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.

Photograph of Britannia Gardens, Shoreditch: 1937. Photo No. 92/105. Class 91.0 BRI. London Metropolitan Archives. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 2.

Map of the Environs of London: 1832. Accessed at [<http://www.londonancestor.com/maps/london-south-th.htm>] 1 April, 2005.

Figure 3.

Newspaper Clipping from the *East End News*, 23 August 1910. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

Figure 4.

Photograph of Providence Place, Stepney, 1909 as printed in Jane Cox, *London's East End Life and Traditions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 32.

Figure 5.

"A Typical Allotment Holder," *Keeping Fit by Allotment Digging: Annual Report of the Society of Friends Allotments Committee and Central Allotments Committee, September 1936-August 1937* (London: 1937).

Figure 6.

Photograph of "The Triangle Camp," West Ham, 1906. Newham Archives Photograph Collection for West Ham. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 7.

Photograph of the Mudchute Allotments, Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2004. Author's own.

Figure 8.

Photograph of Mudchute Allotments, Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2004. Author's own.

Figure 9.

Photograph outside of the Mudchute Allotments, Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2004. Author's own.

Figure 10.

Photograph of "A London Desert Taken over in 1915," as printed in Gerald Butcher, *Allotments For All: The Story of a Great Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918).

Figure 11.

"The Better Claim," *Allotments & Gardens*, October 1919. British Newspaper Library at Colindale.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

*CTAS* – Cubitt Town Allotments Society  
*EHAA* – East Ham Allotments Association  
*GRSCAA* – Grantham Road Men’s Social Club and Allotment Association  
*HDSAS* – Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotments Society  
*LCC* – London County Council  
*LFM* – Labourer’s Friend Magazine  
*PLA* – Port of London Authority  
*WHCAA* – West Ham Council Allotments Association  
*VLCS* – Vacant Land Cultivation Society

## CHAPTER ONE

*“The greatest offence against property was to have none.”*

*E.P. Thompson<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

A photograph taken in the early twentieth century shows an area of Shoreditch in the East End of London ironically named ‘Britannia Gardens’ (Fig. 1). Strangely, there is nothing at all of what we associate with British gardens in the picture, no flowers, no grass, no trees, no sweeping landscape, not even so much as a weed. This was the East End that historians, novelists and other commentators have explained to us was so bleak, desperate and devoid of the pleasures of the country. It was concrete, brick, and existed under the heavy pall of coal smoke and filth. Everything that was wrong with the urban in the eyes of these writers was typical of the East End – crime, prostitution, destitution, dirt, debasement and utter bleakness. Green space in the eastern boroughs was an absolute necessity both for improving the quality of the air and uplifting the spirits of a people subordinated by class and prejudice. However, areas like Stepney and Bethnal Green were built upon in such haste in the nineteenth century that row after row of tenement housing replaced any small spaces of nature that remained from a not so distant agricultural past; Hackney had always been the market supplier to the city proper and the boroughs of East Ham and West Ham were urbanized much later in the

---

<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 61.

nineteenth century than many other parts of the city.<sup>2</sup> People remembered a way of life that was easier, cleaner and closer to nature than what became their reality in places like Britannia Gardens.

Concern over the state of London's East Enders in the late nineteenth century led to campaigns for better housing by people like George Peabody and Octavia Hill.<sup>3</sup> Philanthropy dominated nineteenth-century discourses on the East End referring to a host of proto-welfare programs for orphans, destitute women, the unemployed, the infirm, and the elderly.<sup>4</sup> But there is a less widely known campaign that directed much of the local policy in the boroughs of Hackney, Poplar (now part of Tower Hamlets), East Ham and West Ham (now Newham) from about 1890 to the end of the First World War. It was spurred on by local men who demanded a better lot in life; they demanded access to land. Roy Douglas argued in 1976 that "politically and socially, the land reform movement in urban areas operated from below upwards: it was a movement of people at the 'grassroots' who sought to influence politicians to legislate."<sup>5</sup> In Devonshire, in the late 1880s, urban tradesmen and artisans were said to be more interested in allotments than rural labourers.<sup>6</sup> City-dwelling men were connected to the Allotment Movement in its national scope and sought solutions to their poverty through similar means. Their fight was bolstered by the Allotments Act of 1887 and the

---

<sup>2</sup> Jane Cox, London's East End Life and Traditions (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 17, 22; Council of the London Borough of Newham, West Ham 1886-1986: A Volume to Commemorate the Centenary of the Incorporation of West Ham as a Municipal Borough in 1886 (London: The Plaistow Press, 1986); and Kevin Ducker, "Growing Pains: Allotment Gardening and the East End," Riding East: The Journal of East London Studies 4(3), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Bush, Behind the Lines: East London Labour 1914-1919 (London: Merlin Press, 1984), 14; and H.L. Malchow, "Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London," Victorian Studies 29 (1) (Autumn 1985), 99.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Douglas, Land, People, and Politics (London: Allison & Busby, 1976), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, First Annual Report of the Voluntary Allotments Association (Westminster, 1887), 6-7.

Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1908 that required borough councils to provide allotments in their area should there be a need and desire among residents to take up land for cultivation.<sup>7</sup> Middle class politicians and critics supported the scheme because it promised to “improve” the working classes and in turn make them less socially threatening. Others, like Sir Richard Winfrey of the National Liberal Club, advised that helping working men was of moral and rational interest to landowners and governments. He said, “They produce your best workers in factory and workshop, and your best fighting men. They are worth helping, if necessary, at some financial sacrifice.”<sup>8</sup> Allotments would do this, however, without raising the working-class man out of his social position.<sup>9</sup> This thesis will consider the participation of East End men in what I call the ‘process of allotments’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the boroughs of Hackney, Poplar, East Ham and West Ham. Working class men’s participation as gardeners, organizers, secretaries, and activists in this process enhanced their political and civic lives and created for them a more effective and meaningful brand of citizenship.

### **Brief History of Allotments in the United Kingdom**

After the enclosures of the commons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a great number of agricultural labourers were left with no access to land on which to keep a few animals or grow vegetables. Many left the country in search of work in the growing towns and the burgeoning industrial cities like Birmingham,

---

<sup>7</sup> K.J. Allison, “The Provision of Allotment Gardens in East Yorkshire,” *Northern History* 37 (2000), 275; and Douglas, 104. Douglas says the 1887 Allotments Act was “a major landmark in the development of the allotments system;” also see Sir John Little Green, *Allotments and Small Holdings* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896); and James Brooke Little, *The Law of Allotments for the Poor; Together with the Incorporated Statutes* (London: Shaw & Sons, 1887).

<sup>8</sup> Sir Richard Winfrey, *Address on Allotments and Small Holdings* (London: Political Committee of the National Liberal Club, 1907), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, 103.

Newcastle, Nottingham and London.<sup>10</sup> There they often found their poverty to increase and their health to deteriorate in the usually overcrowded and unsanitary working class districts. Facing an economic crisis characterized by high food prices, low wages, and bad harvests, working people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fared considerably worse than those who lived and worked before them.<sup>11</sup> The allotments scheme was a complex and diverse social, political, and economic movement that provided the labouring classes with small plots of land, usually no larger than one-eighth of an acre, on which to grow vegetables. In the country, allotments were sometimes attached to cottages or adjacent to a landowner's fields. In cities, like Birmingham and Sheffield, allotments were given by landowners and located on the fringes of the city.<sup>12</sup> Adopted by landowners, the church, and later local governments, allotments acted as a landed solution to the many social and economic hardships labourers faced; some say it was a way of reversing enclosure.<sup>13</sup> In the nineteenth century, allotments were embedded in a social ethic that espoused industriousness, sobriety, respectability, and independence. They were places in which a working man could grow his own food with his family's help to supplement low, casual or seasonal

---

<sup>10</sup> Simon Miller, "Urban Dreams and Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920-45," Rural History 6(1) (1995), 99. Miller refers to the "rural exodus" into the city; and N. Flavell, "Urban Allotment Gardens in the Eighteenth Century: The Case of Sheffield," Agricultural History Review 51(1) (2003), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Burchardt, The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873 (Royal Historical Society, 2002), 231; Boaz Moselle, "Allotments, Enclosure, and Proletarianization in Early Nineteenth-Century Southern England," Economic History Review 68(3) (1995), 482; Malcolm Chase, 'The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 4-6; Jamie Bronstein, Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4; and D.C. Barnett, "Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty, 1780-1840," in Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution. Essays Presented to J.D. Chambers. Edited by E.L. Jones and G.E. Mingay (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), 162.

<sup>12</sup> See Denis M. Moran, The Allotment Movement in Britain (American University Series, Series XXV, Geography, Volume 1. Peter Lang Pub Inc., 1990) for Birmingham; See Flavell for Sheffield; See First Annual Report of the Voluntary Allotments Association, 18, for Nottingham, Lancesiter, and Malmesbury.

<sup>13</sup> Burchardt, The Allotment Movement, 231.

wages, and his gardening kept him out of the pub and on the land. In addition, allotment gardening provided the healthy leisure activities of exercise, horticultural education, and civic participation.<sup>14</sup> The scheme began around 1793 in several forms and continues to the present day to be a source of great enjoyment, utility, and pride amongst a diversity of rural and urban working peoples.<sup>15</sup>

As with other land reform movements, allotment gardens became of increasing interest to thinkers and reformers of the day who sought remedies in the land to aid the plight of the working classes in both the city and the country. From William Cobbett's provision of small gardens for the labourers on his estate, to Feargus O'Connor's Chartist Land Plan lottery, to George Cadbury's country-based employee cottages and gardens at Bournville, those concerned for the condition of the labouring classes looked to the land for answers to poverty. Even Charles Booth suggested the creation of industrial cottage settlements with "a good garden attached."<sup>16</sup> Besides improving workers' social and physical lives, allotments were potentially a symbol of something much more powerful – the franchise.<sup>17</sup> Political rights were enshrined in property, thus being landless accorded no such rights. Allotments afforded workers the potential for a similar relationship with the land as had landowners at every social stratum. Culturally, allotments allowed for a continuation of rural life in the city. Simon Miller has suggested, from his examination of the writings of C.B. Ford, J.B. Priestley, and Stanley

---

<sup>14</sup> S. Martin Gaskell, "Gardens for the Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure," Victorian Studies 23(4) (1980), 494; and Burchardt, The Allotment Movement, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Allison, 275; there is also evidence for 1770 of a landowner letting 25 acres for the purposes of allotments in Earl Fortescue, "Poor Men's Gardens," The Nineteenth Century 23 (March 1888), 395.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Stephen Constantine, "Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries," Journal of Social History 14(3) (1981), 391.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Gould, Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain, 1880-1900 (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), 12; and Frederick Impey, Housed Beggars, or The Right of the Labourer to Allotments and Small Holdings (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1886), 6.

Baldwin, that these “uprooted English” people remained essentially rural in their inability to fully let go of the idea of the country as evidenced by the window boxes and allotments in British cities.<sup>18</sup>

### **Allotments in the East End**

It is difficult to estimate when the first allotments were worked in the four East London boroughs but several clues allow us to determine approximately when the first soil might have been turned. The London Ordinance Survey maps from 1870 show that many areas of the East End had yet to be built on with any vigour. Hackney boasted considerable green space with plenty of nurseries as well as the larger Hackney Marshes and Hackney Downs. More built up areas like Shoreditch even had several small commons like Stonebridge Common, DeBeauvoir Square, and Hackney Common, while Bethnal Green and Bow bordered the very large Victoria Park. Most of Tower Hamlets, however, had very little green space in 1870 with the maps showing only tiny commons like Hoxton Square, Nichol’s Square and various churchyards. Very few trees are drawn on the Tower Hamlets maps compared to those for Hackney, West Ham and East Ham, as well as further north to Waltham Forest. Maps for Leytonstone, also further north and a traditionally working class area, show vast amounts of green space comparable to Waltham Forest in which records indicate allotments were cultivated as early as 1854.<sup>19</sup> In the heavily built up areas of the East End, like Spitalfields and Whitechapel, there are virtually no green spaces or backgardens shown in the surveys. The analysis of this green space indicates that where industrialization and housing

---

<sup>18</sup> Miller, 99.

<sup>19</sup> London Ordinance Survey Maps for 1870, British Library; also see information from the Higham Hill Common Allotments Association at [<http://www.actionlink.org.uk/HHCAA/Content.cfm?SubSiteContentID=127>].



projects occurred at a slower pace, room for allotments existed. Most likely there were several allotments sites from the 1850s onwards in or around many of the green spaces mentioned above. With the construction of the West India Dock in 1800 and the East India Dock three years later, it is safe to assume allotments were in existence even earlier than has been presumed.<sup>20</sup> Some of the Ordinance Survey maps show allotments in several of the eastern boroughs, especially as Kevin Ducker has written, for East Ham and West Ham, in the late 1860s.<sup>21</sup> However, the maps used in this research did not.

There is little documentary evidence supporting the existence of allotments in the East End before the 1890s. Ducker argues that there were allotments in East Ham and West Ham between 1850 and 1868 when the new Victoria Dock was built employing 12,000 men, many of whom as casual labourers demanded allotments.<sup>22</sup> The Higham Hill Common Allotments Association in Waltham Forest claims that their allotments have been in cultivation since 1854 when labourers were compensated for the loss of access to the common under the Enclosure Acts.<sup>23</sup> Chapter Two will discuss allotments in the East End from 1890 to 1916 and then examine the war time boom in allotments in 1917. Primary sources for the war period are rich and provide the historian with a vivid picture of how East End allotments were unique to their environment and participants.

---

<sup>20</sup> Alan Palmer, The East End: Four Centuries of London Life (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ducker, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The association says: "Our allotments are of historic significance, as they were provided as part of the 1850 Walthamstow enclosure award as allotments or field gardens for the labouring poor, to compensate for the loss to the parish in general rights of pasture on Higham Hill Common. These allotments, which according to rating records were brought in to use in the latter part of 1852, and those at Markhouse, are Greater London's only representative of provision under the 1845 General Inclosure Act. The original plots at Higham Hill were a quarter of an acre; they have been subdivided, but the access paths are still as originally laid out." From [<http://www.actionlink.org.uk/HHCAA/Content.cfm?SubSiteContentID=127>].

East End men participated in the ‘process of allotments’ in many different ways and to varying degrees. Many simply enjoyed gardening on their plots and chose not to participate in the political aspects of allotmenting. The more politically minded formed societies and associations which often had almost full control of setting up, running and maintaining their allotment site. The duties and functions of these societies varied from site to site but most took part in letter writing campaigns for better facilities and usually petitioned for more plots.<sup>24</sup> Most allotments societies organized lectures and seminars and held monthly meetings at which most of the plotholders attended; these were opportunities to learn, to improve one’s plot, and to voice concerns. They were an invaluable part of successfully working within an allotment community. Chapter Three will consider why East End men participated in this process and what kinds of values and skills they gained from their experiences.

The borough councils of Hackney, Poplar, East Ham and West Ham developed very specific kinds of relationships with the men living and working the land within their boundaries. For many of the allotmenters, dealing with the council was beyond their everyday experience. At the beginning, relationships remained on shaky ground as both sides negotiated their positions within existing class structures and notions of power. In fact, in early 1887, the Voluntary Allotments Association called for an easier way for labourers to communicate with landowners and councils concerning allotment provision.<sup>25</sup> The dynamics of these relationships are also examined in Chapter Three as we explore how working class men gained a foothold in their local governing bodies.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

---

<sup>24</sup> Bush, 1. Julia Bush has identified, through Charles Booth’s writings, that nine tenths of East Enders were workers and one third of those lived below the poverty line.

<sup>25</sup> First Annual Report of the Voluntary Allotments Association, 19.

The history of allotment gardening in England belongs to a diverse and non-linear historiography. Indeed, Denis Moran says the study of allotments “is eclectic in scope because, by its nature, the Allotment Movement is a barometer reflecting conditions in society at large.”<sup>26</sup> Until recently, it has been accorded a small space in larger historical narratives ranging from such nineteenth-century topics as Radicalism to leisure and Chartism to nostalgia for pastoral life. Allotment history has only just been taken up in its own right by a handful of scholars interested in the origins and political, economic, and social functions and consequences of the landed welfare scheme. To consider allotment historiography in isolation would be to underestimate the effects its relative exclusion from mainstream labour, rural and urban history has had on its development and recent vigour. Moreover, to consider its connection to works on land reform, Agrarianism, the Chartist Land Plan, and property is to understand allotment history’s place in a complex web of historiographical works on nineteenth-century English labour, land, and society. This introduction to allotment historiography has several goals. First, is to identify and explore historical works that attempt to explain why agricultural labourers and their supporters turned to the land as a solution for the historically specific social problems experienced at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Second, is to determine how historians of allotments have responded to that wider historiography as they at once carve out for themselves a new and growing niche of historical study. Finally, I consider ways in which allotment historiography can now develop and how the earlier work might be helpful in the writing of more nuanced cultural studies. While many of these works fail to deal directly with allotments, they are inescapably important to the recent

---

<sup>26</sup> Moran, 6.

development in allotment historiography. The following selected works on a variety of topics directly related to the history of land are presented here as the historiographical and intellectual inheritance of current allotment history.

Any historiographical inquiry on labour history must begin with E.P.

Thompson's the *Making of the English Working Class* if not at least to acknowledge the huge influence and hegemony his work has had in working class history. Thompson can be useful in his still very applicable theories of class creation and consciousness in the nineteenth century. His approach to class frames a few basic points about allotments and their intimate link to working class history and culture. First, is that class and its meaning are created by its participants.<sup>27</sup> This is useful for historical inquiries of working class land experience and reform; working men defined their relationship to the land in terms of class and actively constructed their concerns about their lack of land into an important lobbying issue for the labour movement. Second, Thompson argued "class" was a historical phenomenon.<sup>28</sup> Many historians, like Malcolm Chase and Jeremy Burchardt, agree that the working class relationship to land was a direct result of the onset of industrialization and urbanization and the perceived and real loss of rights.<sup>29</sup> Next is Thompson's observation that class happens when, in this case, a group of men articulate their identity based on common experiences against another group of men. Indeed, working class men identified themselves as collectively different than the landed elite and newly-emerging middle class property owners precisely *because* they were landless. Thompson defined class consciousness as, "the way in which...

---

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Chase, *'The People's Farm'*, 2-4; Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England Since 1800* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 3-4; and Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement*, 231.

experiences are handled in cultural terms, embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutions.”<sup>30</sup> Other scholars have expanded this idea. Ian Dyck has studied pastoral notions of life on the land and the nostalgic search for Eden in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English songs.<sup>31</sup> S. Martin Gaskell has pegged gardening as a central cultural pastime in English industrial cities by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Chase’s work is perhaps the most sophisticated all of the histories of working men’s relationship to the land; his seminal work *‘The People’s Farm:’ English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* considers the common use of a rights-based language in the land and the meaning of agrarianism.<sup>33</sup> These are central works demonstrating the cultural embeddedness of notions of “the land” in working class consciousness.

Thompson’s more specific commentary on labourers and the land argued that, after enclosure, the poor lost their rights “in the land.”<sup>34</sup> Thompson added that the “greatest offense against property was to have none” – clever sarcasm in the face of widely held contemporary attitudes about the criminality of the poor and their assaults on property.<sup>35</sup> Thompson’s critique of historiographical constructions of the “crowd” and the “riot” led to his groundbreaking argument, together with George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm, that lower class protest movements should be understood as demands for wider democratic rights, not as rebellious unthinking mobs. He supported this claim by insisting that nineteenth-century labour movements were intellectual movements first,

---

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 125.

<sup>32</sup> Gaskell, 479.

<sup>33</sup> Chase, *‘The People’s Farm:’*, 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

often not led by the workers themselves. Indeed, the works of Tom Paine, Thomas Spence, John Stuart Mill, and William Cobbett would suggest this is at least partially true. Thompson was, it must be remembered, very concerned with granting agency to his historical actors and challenging history that favoured Fabian interpretations of the labour movement, interpretations that abhorred violent means of protest.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Thompson's most useful contribution to the history of land centres around the loss of control working people experienced at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thompson's model of productive relations and working conditions typical of the Industrial Revolution, emphasizing that its changes were imposed on the "freeborn" Englishman, is especially helpful for attempting to understand what the loss of access to the land meant for working people.<sup>37</sup> Many grievances, he says, were symptomatic of new imbalances between forms of ownership and the lives of working people who, with industrialization, had lost control over their labour and thus over the chief property owned. Ultimately, parts of the *Making of the English Working Class* still fit nicely as theoretical bases for the study of land and labour. However, it does not recognize land as a primary historical category as do the subsequent works.

Various responses to the poor condition of both rural and urban labourers considered ways in which returning workers to the land might help their unfortunate situation. Historians have taken up this history with equal variety. These responses are organized into four categories: Land reform and agrarianism; the Chartist Land Plan; intellectual and ideological philosophies about property and the countryside; and finally, allotments. The works considered here represent the best current scholarship

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 189, 194.

particularly helpful for the study of allotments. The more recent works consider postmodern interpretations of the meaning of “the land” and depart from the sound economic approaches of the older texts.

### **Land Reform and Agrarianism**

In 1988, two critically important works were published on the history of land and labour: Malcolm Chase’s *The People’s Farm* and Peter Gould’s *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain 1880-1900*.

Chase’s is the more sophisticated of the two but this is not to detract from Gould’s also valuable contribution. Chase recognized industrial historians’ neglect of the land question and reasserted the importance and centrality of the movement to working class politics and culture in the Industrial Revolution.<sup>38</sup> His main research interest considered the ideas of Thomas Spence and his followers who sought a radical redistribution of the land backed by an ideology of equality in property for all.<sup>39</sup> Agrarianism is of particular value for urban studies of city-dwellers’ continued connections to the land. Chase defined agrarianism as an industrial, urban working class movement concerned with the economic, social, and political dislocation its participants had recently experienced; it sought solutions in and on the land and should not be thought synonymous with agriculture.<sup>40</sup> Like much of the allotment historiography that would follow, the essential argument of Chase’s work is that agrarianism stemmed from more than just a nostalgic collective memory of life on the land; it was deeply connected to the social and economic changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization.<sup>41</sup> Chase’s

---

<sup>38</sup> Chase, *‘The People’s Farm:’*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 4.

analysis draws heavily from the radical newspaper the *Poor Man's Guardian*, a source that would prove useful for many subsequent studies of land and allotments. Easily drawn from the *Guardian* was the recognition that reformers believed the elite “monopoly of land” was the source of all social, economic, and political inequality in society and that it had to be reconfigured to eliminate the vast disparities between the rich and the poor. Chase argues that all popular politics in the 1830s and 1840s were affected by this belief and thus the centrality of land must not be ignored.<sup>42</sup>

Chase identifies a long tradition of labour history that had ignored this very point. He comments on the oddity of that neglect considering the distinctive ideology labour historians adopted “based upon an experience of dispossession” and focused on the “deep-rooted tradition of lost freedoms and rights.”<sup>43</sup> Chase makes a strong case for the dangers of this historiographical neglect and worried that in the 1980s there was still no exhaustive study of land and labour in Britain. His book, in his own words, was “concerned with those who were led from an agrarian analysis of the cause of inequality to agrarian prescriptions for them; who posited a relationship between man and soil of peculiar profundity; and who sought, through a return to the land, to negotiate the form and future of industrializing society.”<sup>44</sup> The relationship of “peculiar profundity” Chase spoke of, was intricately woven into the fabric of industrial life. Indeed, he calls it an “urban weft woven to [a] rural warp.”<sup>45</sup> Attitudes about the countryside emerged at a time of conflicting attitudes about past life on the land. For example, Chase points to middle class intellectuals like Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill who belittled rural life

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 15.



even though the notion of the countryside figured prominently amongst urban workers.

Chase notes that cities were still very much rural places with open spaces and that working class families enjoyed rural leisure time walking and berry-picking.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, Chase insists that a continued connection to the land was essential to working class life and culture and held ingrained meaning in workers' daily lives. It was not just nostalgic and romantic; it was tangible and could be found in working class humour, language, song, medicine, and pastime.<sup>47</sup> Chase's attention to the cultural aspects of the working class connection to the land has made a significant contribution to the historiography of agrarian thought that had earlier neglected such an approach. This context set the stage for all subsequent work on land and labour and allotments.

Like much of this historiography, Peter Gould admits that his book is an awkward fit in the wider tradition of labour history and says it is difficult to categorize. In order to understand why reformers in the late nineteenth century turned "back to the land" for answers to continuing social problems and inequality, Gould considers the early ideological and emotional inheritance of understandings of the land. Like their political radical predecessors in the 1830s and 1840s, today's Greens are sharply critical of the philosophy of industrialism, capitalism, and the consequences of the city for the land. Throughout the nineteenth century, Gould suggests, "nature" had many meanings, as did "land," but usually invoked some feeling of pleasure and contentment.<sup>48</sup> The meaning of nature and the country implied some dissatisfaction with urbanism; it was sympathetic to rural and natural phenomena.<sup>49</sup> Gould looks to the Greeks and Romans

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 9, 11, 15-16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 14-16.

<sup>48</sup> Gould, viii.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, ix.

to find they too operated within a dichotomy of city and country – that the country was innocent and the city corrupt.<sup>50</sup>

Gould traces the late eighteenth-century “re-establishment” of ideological links to nature and land back to the Diggers of the seventeenth century; logically, one could trace the tradition back through the medieval period to the ancient world.<sup>51</sup> Yet, Gould, like Chase, suggests the turn “back to the land” was precipitated by historically specific industrialism, capitalism, and urbanization. Working peoples and the growing middle class came to disrespect the idleness of the landed elite; the democratic spirit of the town and city infused new professionals with distaste for heredity, hierarchy, and tradition in the country which, in part, explains why the middling ranks of society were as much interested in land reform as were working peoples.<sup>52</sup> Gould’s discussion of how allotments fit into this wider understanding of virtue and industry in the land rests on the assumption that independent gardening led to some retrieval of control in workers’ labour and harboured some regret in having lost access to the land.<sup>53</sup> Where Gould differs considerably from his contemporaries is in his assertion that the return to rural life was exclusively contingent on lowered socio-economic conditions. He argues that when employment was high and food prices were low, the desire to return to the land was subdued and exhibited “little depth.”<sup>54</sup> A decade later, Jamie Bronstein would heartily disagree.

In her 1999 book *Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862*, Jamie Bronstein takes up where Chase and Gould left off

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

with a comprehensive intercultural contextualization of the land reform movement. Bronstein's central historical problem is to determine why the English and American movements differed so greatly in their practice when they shared the same intellectual tradition. Her assessment is that the differences in physical space and government structures led the movements in two very different directions.<sup>55</sup> She contends that the shared intellectual heritage consisted of the notion of man's natural right to land; the superiority of a healthy country living; and the sanctity and socio-political significance of "land."<sup>56</sup> Her work questions traditional concepts of class as a hermetically sealed group as she shows the land reform movement was a cross-class endeavor that was essentially middle class in ideology – that ideology then spoke to the growing concerns of working people.<sup>57</sup> She also questioned Thompson's assertion of class permanence, suggesting those involved in land reform employed a discourse of rights for *all*, not just for the working classes.<sup>58</sup> Most unlike Gould, Bronstein suggested working people in Britain had such a yearning for land they were prepared to look for it outside their own country to America.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, John Archer has said of allotments that they decreased working people's desire to look elsewhere for land.<sup>60</sup>

Bronstein furthers the very interesting problem of whether or not land reformers were backward-looking and nostalgic or forward-looking and modernizing. She says old ideas about the use and value of land were combined with new ideas about the value

---

<sup>55</sup> Bronstein, Land Reform, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 2, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>60</sup> John Archer, "The Nineteenth-Century Allotment: Half and Acre and a Row," Economic History Review 50(1) (1997), 33.

of labour.<sup>61</sup> Unlike Chase, Bronstein does not implicitly state that the land reform movement was modern and caused by industrial and urban woes. Rather, her analysis is more nuanced and recognizes the diversity of the movement which reflected a common response to capitalism and urbanization but it differed from Chase's assertion in its expression. This is symptomatic of her comparative approach but reveals much more than just a duality of movements. While common languages of oppression drove workers to look back at the land, Bronstein argues their diversity of goals was rooted in their varied industrial and urban experiences, their class, their gender, and most importantly their memories of life on the land.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, one of the things historians of land, and later allotments, have yet to determine is the complexity and diversity of this collective memory; something this thesis will attempt to do by employing regional parameters. Bronstein suggests workers held notions about a golden age of life on the land; whether or not it was correctly remembered is debatable.<sup>63</sup> In the end, Bronstein commends the land reform movement for its "vitalization" of ideas about a past life on the land.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Chartist Land Plan**

Histories of the Chartist Land Plan are important points of departure for studies of allotments because, like the small gardens, the Land Plan was one of several different land redistribution projects of the early nineteenth century. This discussion is concerned with the several works that deal directly with the Land Plan and the uses of that history for allotment studies. Not surprisingly, Chase and Bronstein have very recently

---

<sup>61</sup> Bronstein, Land Reform, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 2, 248.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 250.

contributed to a new and original historiography on the Land Plan. Also considered here, is a much earlier work on the Plan by P. Searby in 1968. This thirty year hiatus in Chartist Land Plan studies and the renewed attention suggests there is something of value in its re-examination for historians concerned with land and meaning. Indeed, Chase suggested in 1988 that the Plan be more fully integrated into histories of land and labour.<sup>65</sup>

Even in 1968, Searby, in his article “Great Dodford and the Later History of the Chartist Land Scheme,” asserted the importance of Feargus O’Connor’s Land Plan for Chartism. This is surprising considering Chase, in 2003, pointed to a tradition before the 1980s that “dogged” O’Connor’s reputation.<sup>66</sup> In the 1840s, O’Connor envisioned setting up working peoples on small plots of land. It was so popular that over 70,000 members subscribed to the Plan, only a small fraction of whom ever got any land.<sup>67</sup> In contrast to Gould, Searby argued that working people had no deep attachment to the land. An examination of Dodford records reveals that most settlers there had come from quite far away which Searby says “reveal[s] the widespread and deep longing in Britain for the life of an independent smallholder.”<sup>68</sup> Searby criticizes Andrew Doyle, who in 1848, was commissioned by the government to assess the Chartist communities set up under the Land Plan, by saying that had he visited Dodford, his objections to the scheme would have been lessened.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Searby seems a great supporter of the Land Plan at Dodford, making a strong case for its strengths over its weaknesses.

---

<sup>65</sup> Chase, ‘The People’s Farm:’, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Malcolm Chase, “Wholesome Object Lessons:’ The Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect,” English Historical Review 2003 118(475), 60.

<sup>67</sup> P. Searby, “Great Dodford and the Later History of the Chartist Land Scheme,” Agricultural History Review 16(1) (1968), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 41.

Bronstein and Chase applied their earlier methods and theoretical bases to two recent articles on the Chartist Land Plan in 2001 and 2003 respectively.<sup>70</sup> Interesting for allotments history, is Bronstein's discussion of O'Connor's criticisms of the American land reform movement. O'Connor argued that it was ridiculous to give one man 160 acres when his plan would not allot anymore than 4; he felt the Americans would run out of land and social inequality would prevail.<sup>71</sup> This sentiment helps us to understand how even an allotment of one-eighth of an acre could be so meaningful in Britain but ridiculed in America; Bronstein's comparative approach clarifies the specifics on each side of the Atlantic. Likewise, Bronstein considers the similarities between the Land Plan and allotments: "Chartist allotments resembled the small and politically inoffensive garden plots that philanthropists rented to British workers in the 1830s and 1840s."<sup>72</sup> However, Jeremy Burchardt has shown that allotments were *highly* "politically offensive" spaces and the works considered here on the Chartist Land Plan would suggest the same for that scheme.<sup>73</sup> Noticeably then, this is an area of some confusion for Bronstein whose expertise on the subject should have alerted her to the problematic character of her description of allotments.

Bronstein reasserts her claim that the cornerstone of the land reform movement was the belief that all men were entitled to land enough to support themselves.<sup>74</sup> Joining Chase, in her most recent article, she makes specific reference to the movement

---

<sup>70</sup> Jamie Bronstein, "The Homestead and the Garden Plot: Cultural Pressures on Land Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the USA," The European Legacy 6 (2) (2001), in general; and Chase, "Wholesome Object Lessons:", in general.

<sup>71</sup> Bronstein, "The Homestead and the Garden Plot," 160.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>73</sup> See Jeremy Burchardt, "Land, Labour, and Politics: Parliament and Allotment Provision, 1830-1870," in Agriculture and Politics in England, 1815-1939, edited by J.R. Wordie. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000, and "Rural Social Relations, 1830-50: Opposition to Allotments for Labourers," Agricultural History Review 45 (2) (1997): 165-75.

<sup>74</sup> Bronstein, "The Homestead and the Garden Plot," 159.

as modern and positioned towards a “commercialized and precapitalist future.”<sup>75</sup> One of the strengths of Bronstein’s article is in her expansion on the political underpinnings of the land reform movement, in particular republicanism, liberalism, and Chartism. She effectively concludes that land reform movements were directly tied to “intellectual currents” that predisposed societies to accept or reject new forms of landholding.<sup>76</sup>

Chase also links the later successes of the allotment movement to some of the intellectual contexts of the Land Plan, and argues for a comprehensive history of the Land Plan that integrates the histories of allotments, Agrarianism, and Victorian culture. The article is substantially historiographical but also provides an up-to-date history of the Plan. In light of recent historical contributions on allotments, Chase draws on both Jeremy Burchardt, the present allotments specialist, and Jamie Bronstein. Connections between the Chartist Land Plan and the allotments movement had not been made prior to the work of Chase and Bronstein in any significant way. The trifecta relationship between land reform and Agrarianism, the Land Plan, and allotments allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural context of allotment provision and the profound connection to the land for a variety of thinkers and social critics. Considered in isolation, land reform, Agrarianism, and the Chartist Land Plan have long been interesting historical topics; now that they can be freshly applied to the history of allotments they are even more valuable and better situated.

### **Intellectual Currents**

The intellectual history of land is remarkably diverse and encompasses studies of literature, political philosophy, and cultural concepts of nature. Central to this

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 172.

discussion is distinguished Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams' seminal work, *The Country and the City*. Several important assumptions can be drawn from this historiographical current for the study of allotments: that political rights were found in the land and that landless labourers sought access to those rights in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; that notions about the healthfulness and beauty of the countryside were created as a result of urbanization and industrialization; and that the existence of a pre-industrial "golden age" is a continued source of historiographical debate.

Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph Ward consider Williams' work to be a literary feat unachievable today. The text was at once a work of literature and history; one that might today be considered too much of one or the other or not enough of either.<sup>77</sup> For historians, the work is not rigorously researched and is more contemplative than anything else. Yet, it has had an impact on the historiography of land and labour. Gould, Chase, Bronstein, and Burchardt appear to have accepted many of Williams' reflections about the creation of the dichotomy of the country and the city. Williams pointed to the persistence of rural ideas even after industrialization, for which he found abounding evidence in literature.<sup>78</sup> He recognized the multiplicity of meanings of nature and country as did Gould in the 1980s.<sup>79</sup> On the issue of whether or not early labourers in the 1830s and 1840s had collectively constructed a pre-industrial golden age, Williams suggested there was an idealization of feudal and pre-feudal

---

<sup>77</sup> Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph Ward, eds. *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 3.



values of a time when social relations were less disparate.<sup>80</sup> For allotment historians, there is certainly a question of whether or not the allotment movement was a throwback to an idealized vision of the paternal relationship between lord and tenant. Williams suggests the mystic image of the paternal lord was part of the construction of the golden age but Burchardt would argue that the allotment movement was never about looking backwards to paternalism, that it was unquestionably a modern movement.<sup>81</sup> On a more abstract philosophical level, Williams suggests “our powerful images of country and city have been ways of responding to a whole social development.”<sup>82</sup> No doubt, the meaning of “the land” in the early nineteenth century, a time of intense social discussion about land reform, was occasioned by the questioning of all social functions – master-employee relations, access to food, political opportunity, and distribution of wealth were all parts of that total discourse. As a concluding thought, Williams suggested the country had become synonymous with the past while the city was equated with the future creating an “undefined present.”<sup>83</sup> The dichotomous philosophy of the country and the city speaks volumes to the ways in which the historiographical debate has long been concerned with determining whether or not land reform movements were nostalgic or innovative. More aptly, the “undefined present” for land reformers was characterized by both a connection to the rural past and an incorporation of the urban future.

In his book, *Property Rights and Poverty: Political Argument in Britain, 1605-1834*, Thomas Horne examines how writers on the philosophy of property reconciled the natural rights of man to property with the necessity for exclusion in the emerging

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 40; and Burchardt, The Allotment Movement, 82.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 297.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

capitalist system.<sup>84</sup> He says the works of Paine, Cobbett, and Spence all struggled to define the most appropriate ways to accommodate individual and common interests in land. Where Cobbett and Spence differed from some of their contemporaries was in their use of property theory as an “early defense of a welfare state and a critique of inequality.”<sup>85</sup> Other issues at stake were primogeniture and entailment – processes that continued to keep property in the hands of a few. What is most interesting about Horne’s work, and echoed in all of the other works mentioned thus far, is the notion that Paine, and later Cobbett, were uninterested in common land – both defended private property outright.<sup>86</sup> This defense of private property provided the philosophical rationale for the establishment of allotments which were after all individual plots of land, never communal. Thus, private ownership had positive meaning in society; where it had negative meaning was where it was insultingly held in excess. Horne lauds the strength of property philosophy in its ability to think in terms of the common rights of all men while at once expressing those rights through practical individually-based arrangements.<sup>87</sup>

Ten years separate two important works on nostalgia for life on the land: Ian Dyck’s 1992 *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* and Jeremy Burchardt’s 2002 *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England Since 1800*.<sup>88</sup> Dyck considered Cobbett’s histories of the English past as historically constructed by the industrialization and urbanization of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

---

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Horne, Property Rights and Poverty: Political Argument in Britain, 1605-1834 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 252-3.

<sup>88</sup> Dyck and Burchardt, Paradise Lost, in general.

He says that only after the economic hardships of the Napoleonic Wars did people begin to look backwards to perceived happier times.<sup>89</sup> Their nostalgia, he says, looked not to a golden age of perfect harmony but rather to the world of the 1790s; it was epitomized by the degree of their exploitation not simply the principle of capitalism.<sup>90</sup> Dyck's assessment of Cobbett's construction of nostalgia and the reasons why he and others looked back to the land for answers to inequality is, like the allotments debate, inclusive of a debate about how much backward-looking sentiments were at the same forward-looking. Burchardt and many other historians have since drawn on Ian Dyck's portrait of Cobbett, and his contribution remains engaged in debates about the degree of nostalgia in all the land reform movements of the nineteenth century.

Burchardt's work on rural meaning supplements his primary work on allotments. *Paradise Lost* draws on historians like Dyck, Gould, and Horne. Burchardt introduces an innovative approach to studying the countryside as a site of consumption rather than production as is usually the case. He says the countryside had another function as a place of leisure and nature in its own right. Too often have historians used "rural" and "agricultural" to connote the same thing; Burchardt says they mean very different things.<sup>91</sup> Burchardt recapitulates the earlier work that showed attitudes about the country were very much embedded in social changes occurring in the city; the strength of his work is in the primacy of this argument and its centrality in his writing.<sup>92</sup> Like Dyck and Gould, Burchardt demonstrates for the nineteenth century an idealized understanding of rural life set against the ills of urban living. He says the countryside

---

<sup>89</sup> Dyck, 126, 147.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 145, 138.

<sup>91</sup> Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 1-2.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 3.

“resonated” with the working classes because it represented regaining control over one’s labour and an independent self-sufficiency.<sup>93</sup> These historical accounts of the intellectual and ideological traditions underlying the diverse and complex land reform movement have made it clear that land reform was a modern phenomenon based on a specific memory of the rural past; it was a dynamic and engaged process of thought that crossed class lines and intellectual disciplines. Allotment historians have both contributed to it and been influenced and guided by it; it provides categories of meaning in the land that help us understand why the allotment movement enjoyed, and still enjoys, so much popular support.

### **Allotments**

Allotment historiography is a small but growing body of work that draws heavily from the traditions already discussed. Yet, it has its own historiography with its own debates that are separate from other works on land reform. Up to and including the 1960s, allotments were mentioned only in passing in larger historical texts belonging to the expanding fields of labour and social history. After the 1969 Thorpe Report, allotments studies experienced a small flurry of activity. The Report analyzed for the Minister of Land and Natural Resources why British allotments had been experiencing a decline in popularity since the end of the Second World War. It suggested that the very word “allotment” conjured up notions of poverty and charity. Most scholars responded to Thorpe’s call for a reinvention of the image of the allotment from “landed dole” to “leisure garden.”<sup>94</sup> But this work was unsubstantial and led to virtually no contributions in the 1980s. However, some scholars did foresee the value of studying allotments.

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Harry Thorpe, “The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use,” *Geography* 60(3) (1975), 170.

John Harris at least mentioned allotments in his accompanying book to an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum entitled *The Garden: A Celebration of One Thousand Years of British Gardening* in 1976.<sup>95</sup> In 1981, Stephen Constantine called for more studies of ordinary people's gardens since gardening had become one of the most significant and popular pastimes in England but possessed a history that had been largely ignored.<sup>96</sup> It was not until the early 1990s, when historians regained an interest in allotments that the topic expanded in a significant way. Since then, allotments historiography has experienced a minor boom, which is attributable to a renewed interest in organic production, locally grown food, the contempt many British people feel for the large American-style supermarkets, and the loss of the small neighborhood market in some areas.<sup>97</sup> With a popular interest in allotments' ability to restore control over food production, scholars now have reason to properly study their history. As more contributions come forth, a richer and more nuanced discussion is taking place.

The standard text on allotments, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture* by David Crouch and Colin Ward, emerged from the Allotments Research Unit at Birmingham University in 1989.<sup>98</sup> Crouch has since written a variety of other books and articles on allotments including an analysis of the allotment as a site of artistic contemplation in a recent book *The Art of Allotments*.<sup>99</sup> The sociological methods employed by these two authors in all of their work on allotments, but especially in the

---

<sup>95</sup> S.J. Daniels, "The Garden: A Celebration of One Thousand Years of British Gardening," *The London Journal* 5(2) (1979), 307.

<sup>96</sup> Constantine, 387.

<sup>97</sup> See Tara Garnett, "Urban Agriculture in London: Rethinking our Food Economy," in *Growing Cities, Growing Food*. Edited by Bakker et al (Feldafing: Deutsche Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung, 2000).

<sup>98</sup> David Crouch & Colin Ward, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture* (Nottingham Five Leaves Publications, 1997).

<sup>99</sup> David Crouch, *The Art of Allotments* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2003).

first book, have influenced most of the studies that followed. The cultural context in which the book was written has been referred to by Jeremy Burchardt, Kevin Ducker, Denis Moran, and N. Flavell. *The Allotment* considered every aspect of the scheme from its early inception, to the repercussions of the Thorpe Report in 1969, to women's involvement, to local political activism, and even included a comparative analysis of similar schemes in continental Europe. The comprehensive text initiated a discussion on a variety of related topics and reaffirmed the cultural significance of allotments.

Crouch and Ward introduced a number of now standard arguments about allotments in *The Allotment*. They argued that allotments were essentially urban phenomena and that city people were as much involved in the land question as were those in the country.<sup>100</sup> Burchardt and Moran have echoed this assertion as do I in this thesis. Crouch and Ward similarly suggest there was “a stimulus to agitation” for better food, living, and recreation in the nineteenth century that fostered, along with enclosure, a climate for allotment creation.<sup>101</sup> The duo connects us to the world of the working-class man in the book by demonstrating the allotment was his “preserve.”<sup>102</sup> This was a green space strictly for working men, whereas as the authors point out the typical English square was not.<sup>103</sup> The book celebrates the “treasured reclusiveness of the allotment” for working class men.<sup>104</sup> Women and children were, nonetheless, involved in the cultivation of the allotments. One of the strengths of the book is its anecdotes of allotmenters' childhood memories on dad's plot. This oral history is extremely valuable to historians now researching allotments and would provide an excellent

---

<sup>100</sup> Crouch & Ward, 15, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 19, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 6.

primary source base for badly needed studies of allotments and the family. Most important is Crouch and Ward's commitment to understanding the political dimensions of allotmenting. The right to grow one's own food, they say, is fundamental to our existence yet we rarely consider it.<sup>105</sup> Allotmenters, however, continue to wage a war for the right to provide for themselves and their families in a healthy and safe manner. The authors' contention that allotments "... have been the result of municipal socialism, conservative paternalism and liberal civic pride," confirms the existence of a strong but contested political undercurrent that runs through every allotment site.<sup>106</sup> The allotment, in their estimation, was not a place of charity but of self-help. Yet it was a place where the word itself "imply[ed] deference and allocation, qualities that indicate a relationship between the powerful and the powerless...."<sup>107</sup> It is a place of constant struggle for respect, status, survival, and escape.<sup>108</sup>

It is because of Crouch and Ward that as allotments scholars we returned rather excitedly to Harry Thorpe. In 1965, Professor Harry Thorpe was approached by the Minister of Land and Natural Resources to conduct a comprehensive review of millions of pounds worth of allotment land in Britain in order to assess its viability and then current usefulness. He was asked to investigate the historic, social, economic, political, and legal aspects of allotments which resulted in the *Report of the Departmental Committee of Inquiry into Allotments* in 1969, a long document that in the end suggested allotments should shed their stigma of charity and be regenerated as "leisure

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 161.

gardens.”<sup>109</sup> A professor of Geography at Birmingham University, Dr. Thorpe seemed determined to bring an aesthetic to the allotment that was never a part of its reality. Crouch and Ward, on the other hand, celebrated the individuality and innovativeness of allotments and the do-it-yourself processes that accompanied them. Thorpe’s mission in the late 1960s was to bring allotments up to date; he had to find a way to increase cultivation to avoid losing the scheme altogether. Historians studying allotments since the 1990s have vehemently argued against Thorpe’s assertion in articles and in the *Report* that allotments were a form of charity; he stated in a 1975 article that the allotment was always a charitable institution.<sup>110</sup> Despite his many unorthodox and seemingly unrealistic suggestions, Harry Thorpe was passionate about allotments. He conducted an extraordinary amount of research that is now of great use to historians. His work is an important departure point in allotments historiography but must be approached with caution.

Although less well-known, Denis Moran’s *The Allotment Movement in Britain* published in 1990, focused on an area with a dense working class population in Swindon, Wiltshire where allotments were provided from the time of earliest industrialization. The purpose of the book as noted by the author, is to account for the emergence of the allotment movement in Britain in the nineteenth century. This objective, however, does not fully represent the extent to which the book will influence further studies of urban allotments. Allotments as “focal points of intense human

---

<sup>109</sup> Thorpe, 169.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 170. A comparative study of allotments might help to better understand in what ways the scheme may or may not have been charitable. See for example for Poland Anne C. Bellows, “One Hundred Years of Allotment Gardens in Poland,” *Food & Foodways* 12(4) (2004): 247-76; and for Canada Marlene Roy, *The Rhetoric and Reality of Allotment Gardens and Sustainable Development: The Case of Allotment Gardens in Winnipeg, Manitoba* (M.A.Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Manitoba, 2001).



activity” are again argued to be part of a self-help ethos rather than one of charity.<sup>111</sup>

Moran also points out that the allotment movement continues to be an indicator of social and economic conditions.<sup>112</sup> While Moran speaks to the difficulty in locating sources, which is a challenge when most allotments associations kept very few records, his work is, in my estimation, the best on urban allotments. His narrative is eloquently written even though in places his geographical methodology bogs down much of the text. Nevertheless, Moran’s attention to the cultural context of allotments in that they are “socially integrating forces within urban” areas and occurred with variation dependent upon community, is the core strength of the book.<sup>113</sup>

Since 1995, Boaz Moselle, John Archer, and Jeremy Burchardt have engaged in a debate about how best to fit allotment history into the earlier historiographical traditions of land reform, Agrarianism, Chartism, and Radicalism. They have done this, not explicitly, but instead through their unique approaches to the history of allotments. Moselle offered an economic analysis that proposed allotment creation corresponded to the memory of common rights before enclosure.<sup>114</sup> Their small-scale beginnings, he argued, were indicative of hostility from farmers who opposed independence for labourers; clearly, Moselle drew from the wider context of the various meanings and rights embedded in the land. Indeed, he says opposition to allotments and support for enclosure were “two sides of the same coin.”<sup>115</sup> Moselle’s weakness lies in his neglect of cultural context. He argues within an economic framework that allotments

---

<sup>111</sup> Moran, 9, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>114</sup> Boaz Moselle, “Allotments, Enclosure, and Proletarianization in Early Nineteenth-Century Southern England,” *Economic History Review* 68(3) (1995), 483.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

functioned within the “political economy” of rural arrangements and were supported for their profitability as much as they were opposed for fostering too much independence amongst workers.<sup>116</sup>

John Archer called for an expansion of inquiry on allotment history including social relations between the three classes of labourer, farmer, and landowner; the timing and extent of the movement; and the role and purpose allotments were designed to serve.<sup>117</sup> Archer accused Moselle of failing to identify the nuances in regional differences that prevailed in England throughout the period and how those differences might have affected his history of the allotment movement.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, Burchardt responded to this dearth of regional specificity in his book *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873*.<sup>119</sup> Most importantly, Archer reacted to Moselle’s lack of cultural context in favour of a purely economic approach: “While economic factors and arguments clearly have a place in our understanding of these unassuming plots of land, it is my contention that issues relating to paternalism, social control, the gift relationship, and rural protest are of equal importance.”<sup>120</sup>

*The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873* is the first full-length treatment of allotment history by an historian in what Burchardt says has been a largely unexplored field. Burchardt’s book differs from the work of Crouch and Ward, Moselle, Archer, and Moran in that it is much more comprehensive, chronological, nuanced, and the result of extensive doctoral research. Burchardt aims to dispel several myths about allotments that may be symptomatic of romantic and nostalgic popular

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 498.

<sup>117</sup> Archer, 21.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>119</sup> Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement*, Parts I and II.

<sup>120</sup> Archer, 22.

conceptions of the past. He principally argues that allotments were forward-looking modern solutions to social changes and problems; they were not, he insists “atavistic” or backward-looking.<sup>121</sup> Burchardt draws on Horne in his claim that the individual tenure of allotments over collective means was an indication of acceptance of the modern market economy.<sup>122</sup> Burchardt’s most impressive element in the book is his positioning of the allotment movement as fundamental to late Victorian society; he says it worked and became popular because it made an otherwise unsustainable exploitative economic relationship viable – it gave the worker a little something more but not enough that his improvement would compromise the entire market economy.<sup>123</sup>

While Jeremy Burchardt’s work best incorporates the earlier historiography of land and labour there are still places in need of further study. First, more nuanced cultural and postmodern studies of the relationship between meanings of “the land” and allotments would further problematize and deepen the existing literature on the subject. Because the land has multiple meanings and land movements had diverse goals, this approach would deviate from a singular explanation for allotments preferred by Moselle for a more complex and richer appreciation of why allotments worked in so many divergent settings and time periods. More works like those of Moran and this thesis are thus necessary. Certainly, there must be something fundamental in the meaning of allotments that makes them adaptable to time and place. Second, badly needed are studies of allotment gardeners and politics. Gaskell hints at civic participation increasing among working class gardeners who represented their interests in voluntary societies and horticultural associations. No substantial work, however, has been done

---

<sup>121</sup> Burchardt, The Allotment Movement, 5.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 232.

on allotment gardening and the working class franchise or on allotments associations. Finally, conceptions of the land in the city are in need of revision and specific application to allotment history to understand why gardening and allotments became so popular in British cities. Much of the existing work discusses the important reality that land reform movements most often possessed urban roots but this now needs to be expanded specifically for allotment history. I have recognized the need for historically sound studies of urban allotments, the only other contributions being a recent article by N. Flavell considering Sheffield's allotments in the eighteenth century and Kevin Ducker's article on allotments in Newham. This thesis will be the first substantial contribution to deal exclusively with urban allotments in the late nineteenth century, and the first to deal with the scheme in London's East End.<sup>124</sup>

Allotment historiography belongs to long tradition of historical writing about land and labour. It is not an easily traceable tradition in part because it was, until recently, marginalized by the Marxist agenda of labour history that favoured the story of trade unionism and the threat of working-class revolution. Some of the issues connected to the wider historiographical tradition have not been considered here such as the usefulness of Marxism and the debate about whether or not agricultural labourers were proletarianized or remained 'peasants' in the strictest European definition. Nor has the collision between "history from below" and intellectual histories of property been problematized here. However, the goal of this discussion was to present the often understated links between earlier histories of land reform and experience amongst working peoples and the new and burgeoning field of allotment studies. The history of

---

<sup>124</sup> That is, it is the first thesis; there is of course Ducker's article.

allotments is understudied and in need of discussions like these that promote connections to inherited historiographical traditions.

## CHAPTER TWO

*“I can’t understand it; you Cockneys come into the country, you merely tickle the soil, and it fairly laughs into bloom, while we poor natives toil and work and cannot produce such results.”*

*London Argus, 1906*<sup>125</sup>

### GREEN SPACE IN THE EASTERN BOROUGHES

Before there was any need for allotments in the East End, there was a rural character to the eastern flank of the city where people lived and worked off the land. The Isle of Dogs, which used to be called Stepney Marsh, housed and fed some of England’s best beef stock on fine pastures (Fig. 2).<sup>126</sup> The *East End News* reported in 1917, that Poplar had “not many years back... produced the most famous celery in England.”<sup>127</sup> Stepney’s market gardens, Whitechapel’s sought-after lilacs, Bow’s blackberries, and Bethnal Green’s famous woods made for an East End that *was* green. Jane Cox reminds us that the historiography of East London has unfortunately dwelt on its “grim” side, resulting in a history that neglects the natural beauty that existed in the boroughs before their downward turn.<sup>128</sup> Walter Besant commented that the history of the East End was “the history of woods and meadows, arable and pasture land, over

---

<sup>125</sup> “London Gardening,” *The London Argus* 14 April 1906, 655.

<sup>126</sup> Cox, 10.

<sup>127</sup> “Allotments for Poplar,” *East End News* 16 February 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

<sup>128</sup> Cox, 171.

which the centuries pass.”<sup>129</sup> Julia Bush describes the East End of the mid-nineteenth century as “riverside hamlets and inland villages set amid orchards, fields and marshes.”<sup>130</sup> Life wasn’t all idyllic though; much of the East End had housed a working class population in less than desirable conditions for perhaps as many as four hundred years.<sup>131</sup> It was in the nineteenth century though that population increases led to an overcrowded East End characterized no longer by pastures and flowers, but by poverty and grime. Yet the people displaced by industry and progress seem not to have forgotten their rural roots; by their “sheer love of the soil,” as Gerald Butcher wrote, and their memories of a time when “flowers and vegetables grew where now the iron railways predominate,” East Enders at the turn of the century demanded a recovery of the green space they had lost.<sup>132</sup> Allotments were a way to reconnect with the land, to regain access to it. But there were other ways we will first explore that brought greenery back to the East End and contributed to the well-being of the residents. This will establish a richer understanding of why East Enders retained a collective nostalgia for the land.

A reporter for the *East End News* in 1893, covered the story of a flower show in Poplar where he lamented that of those who “delighted in the culture of flowers, few, very few, remain.”<sup>133</sup> The success of the show, however, enlivened his spirits and he came to believe that the people of Poplar would regain an interest in horticulture by the

---

<sup>129</sup> As quoted in Cox, 8.

<sup>130</sup> Bush, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Cox, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Gerald Butcher, *Allotments for All: The Story of a Great Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918), 10; and “Flower Show at Poplar,” *East End News* 18 July 1893, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

<sup>133</sup> “Flower Show at Poplar”

“incentive of friendly competition.”<sup>134</sup> Prizes were given in several categories and, for vegetables, a Mr. Izatt, galvanizer from Poplar, took the top prize.<sup>135</sup> Other winners appear in census records to have indeed been members of the working classes; Mr. Hare was a lighterman, Master Rutter later became a marine engineer apprentice, and Mr. McGeorge was a packer in a factory.<sup>136</sup> These men delighted in their ability to grow plants and compete for prizes and esteem. Their life’s work would have been dreary, and gardening afforded a connection with nature that was most definitely absent in their daily routine. Their participation in the flower show at Poplar that summer indicates a commitment to growing, what the reporter called “good specimens,” in their otherwise unpleasant surroundings.<sup>137</sup>

Precipitated by an earlier understanding of the benefits of flori- and horticulture for Londoners in the 1870s, flower shows and competitions became a frequent leisure activity in the East End (Fig. 3.). As early as 1872, *The Metropolitan* reported that the flower show at Bow was “always one of the most popular events in the East of London.”<sup>138</sup> They too commented on the quality of the plants saying that,

the flowers being the result of cultivation on the part of working men in the east of London.... were examples of balsams, geraniums, ferns, lilliums, fuchsias, dahlias, &c., which would have vied with the productions of the best professional gardeners although grown in the midst of East-end confinement and smoke.<sup>139</sup>

Like most comments made on East End produce, there is amazement that plants could grow in the worst conditions and that there was credit due to the men who managed to

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid; and 1901 UK Census for England and Wales, Accessed online at [<http://www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>]

<sup>136</sup> 1901 UK Census for England and Wales

<sup>137</sup> “Flower Show at Poplar”

<sup>138</sup> “Floriculture in East London,” The Metropolitan 17 August 1872, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.



bring life to flowers and vegetables amidst the boundless smoke and soot of the city.

The *London Argus* similarly reported that, “It is fairly evident... that good results depend more upon the efforts put forward by individuals than upon the mere question of locality.”<sup>140</sup>

The Labourer’s Friend Society campaigned for allotments and access to green space throughout the nineteenth century. They published a journal, *The Labourer’s Friend Magazine (LFM)*, from 1834 to 1884 in which they included articles relating directly to the lack of greenery for London’s poor. In 1873, Mary Stanley wrote of an scheme that brought flowers into the city’s poorest districts. She first explained that window gardening had become an important way for Londoner’s to bring nature back to their homes: “Of late years much has been done by the Window Gardening Societies. Few London districts are now without one; and... a new life is imported into the family.”<sup>141</sup> Window gardens had indeed become a common sight in the East End (Fig.4.); those in favour of them reminded East Enders that “every doorway and window is capable of adornment... grateful to the tired eyes of dwellers in London streets.”<sup>142</sup> Another writer for the *LFM* talked of how window gardens were a meaningful part of a working man’s life:

...the dweller in the one back room, the weary city clerk with his limited salary, his many mouths to feed, and his circumscribed house-room, have only their window garden – their long wooden box, enriched it may be with gaudy tiles – wherein to plant childhood’s favourites and keep the colour of God’s carpet green in their memories.... Annual exhibitions of workmen’s flowers take place patronised by the highest in the land; in all directions efforts are being made to spread the growing taste, and, above all, to give the toiling man and woman a home interest.... The culture of plants in our crowded back slums and alleys

---

<sup>140</sup> “London Gardening”

<sup>141</sup> “Flowers for the Poor,” *Labourer’s Friend Magazine* October 1873, 76.

<sup>142</sup> “London Gardening”

would be most beneficial to health....<sup>143</sup>

But Stanley's flower scheme was slightly different; it brought flowers and plants to London residents who were particularly unable to grow their own. Most recipients were elderly or infirm and often said the flowers reminded them of being young; they remembered, "How sweet the country earth do smell!"<sup>144</sup> If they had lived in the East End as children they would have recalled when the area still provided all the benefits of the country. Stanley's ladies committed to bring flowers and greenery in from the county to the "smokiest and dullest parts of London," and in doing so evidently excited a response in the poor that demonstrates a continued and important connection to nature.<sup>145</sup>

In July of 1894, Hackney Marsh was opened as an official park for the people of London and, in particular, of Hackney. It took four years for officials to hear the demands of the residents of the borough to secure the green space as a place of leisure and enjoyment in the bleakness of the district.<sup>146</sup> This would be one of many East End parks to be opened in the last few years of the nineteenth century. The records indicate a growing recognition that the eastern boroughs desperately needed rejuvenation which would come in the form of nature. H.L. Malchow, in an article in 1985, argued that an anti-urban rhetoric drove councils to improve open spaces in an effort to maintain the cultural dichotomy of town and country; a dichotomy the Victorians "used to explain

---

<sup>143</sup> "The Poor Man's Garden," Labourer's Friend Magazine October 1878, 75-6.

<sup>144</sup> "Flowers for the Poor," 78.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>146</sup> "Dedication of Hackney Marsh, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1894," Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

their world.”<sup>147</sup> He continued that it was this desire to return “pastoral life” to Londoners that motivated the parks movement.<sup>148</sup>

In June of 1895, nine acres of park space in the “Poor’s Land” section of Bethnal Green Gardens were officially opened for the benefit of the mainly working class people of the district. The land which, “consisted of orchard, paddock, kitchen garden, and pleasure ground, [were] all in rough and neglected condition.”<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, the council spent the large sum of £2,250 to renovate the park which, for the East End, was a substantial sum of money and suggests that concern over the health and well-being of the residents, let alone improving the esthetic of the area, was a priority. In Poplar, the opening of Island Gardens in August of 1895 evidenced a similar realization in the heavily industrialized Isle of Dogs. The council spent £1,600 to renovate this small park cleaning up “walkways... lighting, fencing, water, [and] seeding.”<sup>150</sup> The council confirmed that it was “almost the only portion of the river front of the Isle of Dogs which is not used for wharfage or commercial premises,” and that they thought it was “a pleasant addition to the parks and open spaces of London.... situated in a manufacturing district where an open space of the kind is much needed.”<sup>151</sup> Municipal authorities in Poplar were determined that vacant land should “serve the useful purpose of a public playground rather than allow it to remain waste and unoccupied.”<sup>152</sup>

Charities would sometimes provide or donate some of their unused land to the

---

<sup>147</sup> Malchow, 97.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>149</sup> “Opening of Bethnal Green Gardens (Poor’s Land Section), 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1895,” Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>150</sup> “Opening of Island Gardens, Poplar, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1895,” Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> “Opening of Tunnel Gardens, Poplar, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1902,” Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

council for the use of the residents. In Stepney, the Mercer's Company donated land to the council in 1904 and allowed for the creation of York Square and Arbour Square.

Philanthropic concerns over the health of the East Enders included the beautification of the lands that housed the poor and a recognition of the importance of green space. York and Arbour squares were,

situated in a thickly populated district, inhabited almost exclusively by persons of the working classes, and any provision, however small, of additional playing space for the children, and of facilities for outdoor recreation generally, is most heartily welcomed.... and will thus do something to brighten the lot of those who are compelled to live under conditions less healthful than the majority of the inhabitants of this country.<sup>153</sup>

Finally, in Limehouse in 1904, Mr. J. Williams Benn, M.P., J.P., and Chairman of the London County Council (*LCC*), officially opened Brickfield Gardens. Limehouse was believed to be one of the “worst supplied” areas in the country in terms of the green space it afforded its residents. The Chairman wrote that, “The population of the neighborhood was mainly composed of the people of the working classes and within a short distance... was an exceptionally poor population;” there was an obvious need to renovate “The Old Brickfield” between Endive Street and Spenlow Street.<sup>154</sup> The officials who opened these parks agreed that Limehouse was a “district [that had] entirely lost its rural character.”<sup>155</sup> The opening and renovation of parks in various areas of the East End was one way the council and the residents came together and attempted to make living there a little more pleasant. Indeed, the *Journal of*

*Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* wrote in 1896, that “horticulture is by no means a

---

<sup>153</sup> “Opening of York Square and Arbour Square in Stepney, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1904,” Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>154</sup> “Opening of Brickfield Gardens, Limehouse, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1904,” Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks. Group LCC/CL/CER/3, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

lost art in the district.”<sup>156</sup> This cherished relationship with nature combined with the efforts and funds that were poured into the parks scheme, would soon translate into the push for allotments in the East End.

### **ALLOTMENTS IN THE EAST END 1890-1916**

In 1855, a Mr. W. Hollington rented 21 allotments in East Ham by the Northern Outfall Sewer for 8s. a year.<sup>157</sup> Today, there are allotments on the East Ham Manor Way in the very same vicinity as Mr. Hollingotn’s first 21 plots.<sup>158</sup> The tradition of allotments in the East End spans over one hundred and fifty years and for the last one hundred there are excellent written records. Kevin Ducker, the only historian to have studied allotments in the East End as noted in Chapter One, focuses on the site at Leyes Road in what is now the borough of Newham. Ducker estimates that allotments were first worked at the Leyes Road site in 1868 according to an Ordinance Survey map. He ventures further that allotments at Leyes Road were probably under cultivation as early as 1854 when construction on the Victoria Dock began. Ducker also states that the Port of London Authority (*PLA*) was providing allotments for its 12,000 employed men around 1880.<sup>159</sup> Ducker’s estimations are important but they are only that, estimations. Because pre-1890s sources are so scarce, historians of allotments in the East End have only small pieces of information from which to determine the extent of allotments in certain areas. No doubt, there had been allotments for agricultural and semi-industrial labourers in the eastern boroughs before the massive industrialization and urbanization they experienced in the nineteenth century. These areas would have been like any other

---

<sup>156</sup> As quoted in Brigid Lowe, “Gardens in Hackney,” *Journal of Garden History* 26(1) (1998), 19.

<sup>157</sup> *Register of Smallholdings and Allotments*. Group PK/GEN/3/6, Allotments, 1889-1902, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>158</sup> See a current London A to Z Guide and Map. Used here is Harper Collins’ *London*, 2003, Plate 116.

<sup>159</sup> Ducker, 72.

in the country. Labourers would have lost access to the commons under the Enclosure Acts and in many cases would have petitioned for and been provided allotments. However, these would have been by and large rural allotments. I am more concerned here with allotments in the East End once urbanization had fully set in. The sources used here to determine the extent of allotments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are for Poplar, East Ham, and West Ham; allotments in Hackney are not examined until the war period.

At this point some explanation of London government during the period is necessary in order to clarify both the relationship between the London County Council (*LCC*) and the boroughs and their equal obligation to provide allotments to residents. Allotment provision depended greatly on the politics of the borough. Provision was high in Poplar, for instance, largely because of its council's connection to the Labour Party.<sup>160</sup> However, under the 1887 Allotments Act, and later the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act, all borough councils were legally bound to provide allotments if there was a demand. Section Two of the 1887 Act provided that the sanitary authority of any urban or rural district would be the body to administer and provide allotments. The law though, did not apply initially to London and there appears to have often been confusion over which level of government, be it the *LCC* or the local council, was responsible for allotments.<sup>161</sup>

London's government had dramatically changed since the 1850s and jurisdictional confusions were endemic to it. John Davis has written that London's expansion in the later half of the nineteenth century created a slew of administrative

---

<sup>160</sup> Philip Bober, "Rate Capping and 'Poplarism,'" *Contemporary Review* 249(1448) (1986), 139.

<sup>161</sup> Brooke Little, no page number.

problems.<sup>162</sup> The mid-nineteenth-century discovery that cholera was a water borne disease for which a prime vector was drinking water sources contaminated by sewage led in 1855 to the centralization of authority over these vital public services in the form of the Metropolitan Board of Works which was responsible for most sanitary and health policies for London.<sup>163</sup> However, by 1888 the Board was absorbed into the newly formed London County Council, a centralized elected body with wide coordinating authority over the government of London and certain powers that overrode those of the borough council. Among the *LCC*'s electors were working-class voters newly enfranchised by the 1884 Parliamentary Reform Act.<sup>164</sup> By 1899, Salisbury's Conservative government created 28 metropolitan boroughs with new boundaries largely, as Susan Pennybacker has argued, to "undercut" the powers of the largely Progressive *LCC*.<sup>165</sup> Both Pennybacker and A.D. Harvey confirm that a particular focus of the *LCC*'s policies was the improvement of the lives of the city's poor. Indeed, by the close of the nineteenth century, the plight of East London had become the city's most pressing issue.<sup>166</sup> In this atmosphere of concern, guilt, and panic over the state of Britain's working classes, borough councils and the *LCC* appear to have worked together in East London to locate and provide allotment sites on vacant land to willing

---

<sup>162</sup> John Davis, "London Government 1850-1920: The Metropolitan Board of Works and the London County Council," *The London Journal* 26(1) (2001), 47.

<sup>163</sup> Susan Pennybacker, *A Vision for London 1889-1914: Labour, Everyday Life and the LCC Experiment* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

<sup>164</sup> Pennybacker, 9; and A.D. Harvey "London Boroughs," *History Today* 49(7) (July 1999), 15.

<sup>165</sup> Pennybacker, 14.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Also see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), the classic work on the issue of Victorian poverty. Pennybacker suggests Stedman Jones was the first to identify the metropolitan crisis of working-class poverty.

residents. While the borough administered the land, the *LCC* in some cases continued to own the land and planned one day for its redevelopment.<sup>167</sup>

The earliest record of allotments in the Borough of Poplar indicates that 182 plots were under cultivation on the Isle of Dogs in 1891. *The East End News* refers to the site as an “allotment settlement” run by a Mr. John McDougall and said to be “the first of its kind in London.”<sup>168</sup> McDougall’s settlement was self-supporting and managed by the tenants, a process which would be duplicated during the war period. The early plots in Poplar, amidst the pollution and situated in the naturally marshy and wet soil of the ancient Stepney Marsh, took on an urban character unlike other sites across the country. The *News* reported that, “The land, which is enriched with street refuse, which the tenants are paid for removing, is exceedingly rich, and produces first-class vegetables.”<sup>169</sup> East Enders were faced with the reality of urban pollution and were prompted to work with these conditions in order to maximize the potential of their location. It seems they did, the site being of “great benefit to the fortunate tenants.”<sup>170</sup> An allotmenteer in Battersea reported similar findings in the soil at his allotment site; as he dug, he “found the soil rich with iron bolts, china, old boots, oyster shells and rags. But I hacked though, and now, with winter coming on, I thank God for the abundance He has given me.”<sup>171</sup> Another site, in Leyton just north of Tower Hamlets, was equally polluted. *Allotments and Gardens* reported that the allotmentees there,

have done grand work and have every reason to be proud of their achievements, and it is encouraging indeed to see how the Eastern stouthearts are keeping aloft

---

<sup>167</sup> The situation in Hackney, as described on Page 109, is a good example of the *LCC* and the Borough working in tandem on the allotments scheme.

<sup>168</sup> *East End News*, 13 February 1894, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Butcher, 29.



the banner of the movement. The results obtained by plot holders after hard and ungrudging work at some places which were formerly brick repositories and dumping grounds provide a very beneficial object lesson in the value of the movement.<sup>172</sup>

Clearly, working men who were fortunate enough to hold an allotment were not discouraged by the hard physical labour required to prepare the soil for cultivation; the reward of producing one's own food far outweighed the difficulty with which London soil was returned to more natural uses.

Between Bromley-by Bow and Stratford, there existed by 1908 "one of the most singular sights in East London," an "Allotment Town." The site was said to be one of the oldest allotments sites in London which would suggest that the plots were remnants of the once rural life not long removed from the area. Two hundred and ninety plots were under cultivation in this part of the East End, and on Saturdays, the whole of the community ventured out to their gardens in what became an important social event for the entire family. Certainly, the working men to whom the plot was rented would have spent more than one day a week at the site as evidenced by the amount of work that was done in improving it. The tool sheds at "Allotment Town" had "gables, porches, dormer windows, and curtains;" these allotmenters were not merely weekend warriors who grew a few vegetables.<sup>173</sup> This was becoming a way of life for a number of working class people. Their participation in allotmenting was part of, in David Crouch's words, England's "living heritage, a heritage that is worked and reworked, in conditions that are partly shaped by wider society and refigured amongst the ploholders

---

<sup>172</sup> "Branch News & Notes," Allotments & Gardens October 1918.

<sup>173</sup> "Allotment Town," East End News 28 August 1908, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

themselves.”<sup>174</sup> What is most interesting about the site in Bromley and Bow is the tenants’ commitment to actively creating in the city a space that was rural in character and reminiscent of life in the country; the site was located in a secluded area, the holders said to have “both town and ‘country’ residences.”<sup>175</sup> The same was true a little further south.

Cubitt Town in the Isle of Dogs was a site of intense allotment activity and housed a great many keen gardeners by 1910. The docklands area was one of the last places in London anyone would have thought could produce “gardens of fair flowers and fresh vegetables that compare very favourably with the produce of the country.”<sup>176</sup> The allotmenters there, who participated in this “pleasant toil[were] dock labourers, lightmen, boilermen, and labourers.”<sup>177</sup> They had a great deal to contend with in setting up their site and took over a year to clear the grounds for allotments. The men were described by the *East London Observer* as “zealous gardeners” who “had to dig through two feet of old iron in a lumber yard, to clear away two barge-loads of burnt matches, and from the foundation of a house that was never built to remove thirty and forty tons of concrete ere they could lay down their... soil.”<sup>178</sup> This was by no means an easy task. The labour required to clear the ground was intense and exhausting especially if the men had worked all day in their respective trades. Allotment gardeners often had to deal with aspersions on their masculinity, being mocked as effeminate, poor, old, and sickly. However, the description of the work at Cubitt Town suggests that it required

---

<sup>174</sup> Crouch, *The Art of Allotments*, 2.

<sup>175</sup> “Allotment Town”

<sup>176</sup> “Cubitt Town Paradise,” *East London Observer* 3 September 1910, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

the qualities of a man who lived up to what were then ‘normal’ standards of respectable Victorian working-class manhood – strength, conviction, sobriety, and industriousness (Fig. 5).<sup>179</sup> The Millwall and Cubitt Town Horticultural Society held a show in the fall of 1910 where the men’s specimens of “cauliflowers, onions, cabbages, carrots, beans, and beetroots” were exhibited and commended for their quality.<sup>180</sup> The determination and dedication of the Cubitt Town allotmenters created a space in the most unlikely of London areas for the community in which diets were improved and fun was had.

Allotment holders in the East End worked harder to create spaces that were country-like than did their rural counterparts; allotments in the country were already in harmony with the rest of the landscape. One allotment holder in south west London disclosed he felt “quite proud of the fact, that, in spite of what I have been repeatedly told was an impossibility, by dint of sheer hard work I have conquered its drawbacks.”<sup>181</sup> In the city, the necessity and desire for green space that was at once natural *and* controlled was greater; plot holders had to conform to the land regulations set by the local council while they developed a space that was both natural and productive. In Britain, there had always been a clear distinction between the city and the country. Wealthy Londoners escaped the city and fled to the country for rest, leisure, and health. Allotments were a way for the London poor to ‘escape’ their city, a city that was very different from what lay west of them. Indeed, Malchow has said that for the “vast majority” of urban dwellers, the country had to be brought to them.<sup>182</sup> The

---

<sup>179</sup> Keith McClelland, “Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850-1867,” in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*. Edited by Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 283.

<sup>180</sup> Butcher, 30.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Malchow, 110.

result was spaces that disrupted normal conventions of ‘rural’ and ‘urban.’ Allotments were not necessarily unsettling or upsetting places but, for local councils, they were confusing places.<sup>183</sup> In the pre-war period, it took innovative councilmen and determined residents to bring allotments to the East End in what had become so quintessentially ‘urban Britain.’

Allotment activity in East Ham and West Ham was as pronounced as in other parts of the East End if not more so in part because the area retained its rural character longer. However, since allotment gardeners there left fewer records from before the First World War, there is little to indicate at what rate allotments were worked and how the men responded to their local councils. It is clear though there was a strong connection in West Ham, at least, to the ‘back to the land’ movement in the early twentieth century. At St. Mary’s Road, in Plaistow, a group of dockers, aided by Councillor Ben Cunningham, appropriated a piece of land and there set up a “farm colony” for the chronically under-worked who named the site “Triangle Camp” (Fig. 6).<sup>184</sup> This seizure took place in 1906 but the struggle for access to land had begun four years earlier in 1902. The local council set up relief works that winter and eventually, in 1905, created their own farm colony at South O’Kendon. However, the council’s attempts to improve the lives of the casual labourers from the docks, failed until Councillor Cunningham took matters into his own hands and set up the Triangle Camp.<sup>185</sup> The Triangle Camp was successful, albeit short-lived. Cunningham’s site gave the men more autonomy than had the council’s at South O’Kendon. Moreover,

---

<sup>183</sup> Crouch, *The Art of Allotments*, 29.

<sup>184</sup> *West Ham 1886-1986: A Volume to Commemorate the Centenary of the Incorporation of West Ham as a Municipal Borough in 1886*, 94, 97.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

Cunningham's dynamic leadership encouraged the men to become "land-grabbers" and partake in "minor skirmishes" for the land.<sup>186</sup> The odd history of the Triangle Camp and Cunningham's dedicated and rebellious participation in the land seizure indicates the councillor precariously positioned himself between the council he should have been loyal to and the men he wished to help. Cunningham risked legal action, which was taken, and spent five months in prison for contempt over the whole affair. All of this was done presumably to aid the plight of the dock workers, many of whom would in the next few years find themselves able to rent allotments from the local council after having been evicted from the Triangle Camp.

There were many legitimate allotments in East Ham by 1915, but as in the other eastern boroughs, creating them took characters like Cunningham and desperately underprivileged men to look to the land in a significant way for improvements to social conditions. City land was at a premium and local councils were resistant to providing allotments for the poor unless absolutely necessary. By the 1916 Cultivation of Lands Order, and even in late 1915 in East Ham, allotments appear to have been a normal presence in borough politics. In one case, the council, having received a letter from the Borough of East Ham Allotment Holders' and Horticultural Association, referred the allotmenters directly to the property owner of 27 acres destined for allotments, which shows perhaps a certain level of trust in the organizational skills of the men. Absent in 1906, this trust suggests the council may have, by the war period, loosened its class conventions and, in order to prevent episodes like the Triangle Camp in West Ham, appeased the working men's demands for allotments in their borough. The provision of allotments kept the borough peaceful, built relationships between councillors and local

---

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

men that were founded on trust, and provided an administrative structure that suited the needs of all parties involved in the scheme. In the next year, all over the East End, allotment provision would change the face of the area and would come to dominate local politics and borough administration.

### **1916 AND THE CULTIVATION OF LANDS ORDER**

In 1916, Parliament passed the Cultivation of Lands Order which permitted all vacant land in boroughs and urban districts to be appropriated for the purposes of allotment cultivation. Poplar was one of the first six of 28 boroughs to take advantage of the Order which was said to speak much for “Poplar’s practical patriotism.”<sup>187</sup> Plots were often rented free of charge after the Order took effect and Londoners were said to have contracted “allotmentitis” – everyone was getting on board to do their bit.<sup>188</sup> Football grounds, parks, graveyards, and vacant lands were all transformed into vegetable gardens. The Isle of Dogs was said to be “a verdant oasis in the desert of docklandia.”<sup>189</sup> The war had created an increasing shortage of food but East End allotmenteers were determined not to let anyone go hungry. In Hackney, one burial ground produced 36,000 vegetable plants of 16 varieties and by March 1917, virtually the whole of the borough was growing food.<sup>190</sup> The boroughs formed special allotment committees to deal with the long waiting lists and administration of the growing scheme. Virtually every vacant piece of land was used including, in East Ham, land near sewage tanks and old Jewish cemeteries and, in West Ham, several cricket clubs.<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>187</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>188</sup> Butcher, 24.

<sup>189</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder March 1917.

<sup>190</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 14 June 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>191</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 28 December 1916; and Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 14 March 1918, both Newham Archives.

## **The Vacant Land Cultivation Society and the East End**

1916 marked the most important year in the history of the Vacant Land Cultivation Society (*VLCS*). Created by American land reformer Joseph Fels in 1907, the *VLCS* in Britain sought to return the worker to the land in all parts of the country but was especially concerned with the plight of working class people in urban districts. Before the 1916 Order, the society admitted to having made “little progress” in the way of securing vacant lands for the purpose of allotments. In 1911, its membership consisted of 140 ploholders working 17 acres of land. As the war progressed, this number steadily rose so that immediately before the passing of the Order, membership had risen to 800 gardeners on 50 acres. The Order, however, within a very short period of time, increased the number of allotment holders connected to the *VLCS* to over 8,000.<sup>192</sup> The *VLCS* became a busy social and political engine that was in frequent contact with the four eastern boroughs considered here. Many of the allotment holders rotated as volunteers in the society’s offices carrying out secretarial duties as well as volunteering on the ground.<sup>193</sup> Their fight for allotments before the Order was passed often encountered indifference at worst and postponement at best in borough council records but in particular in dealings with the *LCC*.

Before the 1916 Order, the *LCC* was, under the Allotments Act 1890, to “have a Standing Committee on allotments which, where sanitary authorities proved unable to obtain land by voluntary agreement, should institute a public enquiry.”<sup>194</sup> The *VLCS* found, however, that until the passing of the Smallholdings and Allotments Act in 1908, councils could, with the consent of the Local Government Board, run their allotment

---

<sup>192</sup> Butcher, 25.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 13.

sites as they saw fit.<sup>195</sup> This resulted in neither proper protection nor rigorous provision for allotment gardeners. What the 1916 Order did was to ensure that all residents of a county or district who demanded allotments would be provided them and, that with more land under cultivation, everyone's needs would be more easily met. The *VLCS* called the Order "the greatest drama... in land reform for many generations," and said that "the greatest obstacle allotment workers had experienced – the securing of land – had been overcome."<sup>196</sup> Yet, amidst all of this excitement and promise, the society had trouble getting the *LCC* to comply with the Order; a loophole in the law provided that county councils did not have to create allotments on vacant lands only that they were now able to do so.<sup>197</sup>

In January of 1917, the society wrote to the Hackney Borough Council, having had no response from the *LCC*, regarding a  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre piece of derelict land in Hackney. *VLCS* members must have been encouraged by the Borough of Hackney's recommendation:

That the London County Council be urged to exercise, with as little delay as possible, the powers which now are vested in the County Council under the Cultivation of Lands Order, 1916, with a view to getting into cultivation all open lands within this Borough available and suitable for such cultivation.<sup>198</sup>

The society had already received 54 applications for the land in question and was concerned that they would lose the confidence of the working people who had applied to them for plots. Another option presented by the society was to turn over applications to

---

<sup>195</sup> The Smallholding and Allotments Act of 1908 consolidated and repealed all previous allotments legislation and reiterated the 1887 Allotments Acts provision that local councils were required to provide allotments to meet the demands of residents. Previous to the 1887 Act, local councils were under no obligation to provide allotments for the poor. The 1908 Act clarified all earlier laws and made more central the obligations of local councils.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>198</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 11 January 1917, Hackney Archives.



another governing body. The Hackney Borough Council investigated the situation and reported later that month that, according to the *LCC*, license had already been given to the Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotment Society (*HDSAS*) to run all of the vacant land sites in the area.

There was similar confusion in the Borough of Poplar that same January regarding 17 acres at Cubitt Town and 20 additional acres scattered about the borough. The *VLCS* wrote to Poplar suggesting the creation of an allotment society and that the license to cultivate from the *LCC* be transferred to them, “they undertaking to mark out and allot the plots (rent free) and supervise the work, without charge.”<sup>199</sup> The society also promised to send representatives to meetings and provide seed potatoes at a discounted price.<sup>200</sup> Yet, as in Hackney, the borough council in Poplar chose to keep the administration of the district’s allotments in local hands; the Poplar Borough Allotment Society was formed and the *LCC* license was transferred to them not to the *VLCS*.<sup>201</sup> In East Ham, the 1916 Order was circulated to councillors and even to the Mayor in December of 1916 almost directly after its passage in November. At the same time, the council received an offer from the Grantham Road Men’s Social Club and Allotments Association (*GRSCAA*) to act as the “council’s agents with regard to letting for allotments any unoccupied land which may be taken over by the council.”<sup>202</sup> East Ham councillors put the local allotments associations in charge of setting up and maintaining the sites within their boundaries as did their counterparts in West Ham. The

---

<sup>199</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 12 January 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, 19 December 1916, Newham Archives.

VLCS was responsible for some 80 plots in East Ham but the council clearly preferred to deal directly with the *GRSCAA*.<sup>203</sup>

What is interesting in all cases is that the local councils chose not to enlist the services of the very active and organized *VLCS*, but to give local working men the opportunity to form their own societies and deal directly with the borough. It is difficult to gauge whether or not there was some level of disillusion or distrust between the *VLCS* and the borough councils, but it is clear there was most definitely some uneasiness with the prospect of allowing Fels' society to administer local land. The *VLCS* was, however, very good at self-promotion and has left records that would indicate their work was widely accepted. Here, in the newspaper *Allotments and Gardens*, their work is commended by Edward Owen Greening, Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society:

...the special work of the Vacant Land Society has more than doubled, and in every district of the metropolis can be seen plots of land formerly ugly rubbish places now highly cultivated by happy allotment holders. The yield of these redeemed London waste lands cannot have been less in 1917 than £100,000 value of vegetable food.... Borough Councils and railway companies, generous employers and public bodies, gas and water companies and independent allotment societies all took a hand in the work everywhere, on summer evenings and Saturday afternoons, the wanderer through London streets came upon men and boys happily at work on the newly acquired garden plots.<sup>204</sup>

The work of the *VLCS* was no doubt successful and important in certain places but as clearly evidenced by the local borough records, it was not essential to the creation of wartime allotments in the East End. Local councils evidently preferred to trust in the relationship they would develop with local allotmenters rather than deal with an association that, while its intentions were good and its organization was outstanding, was essentially an outside force perhaps somewhat unfamiliar with the specific concerns

---

<sup>203</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, Allotments Committee, 17 April 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>204</sup> "Our Widening Horizons," *Allotments & Gardens* January 1918.

and politics of the East End. Moreover, the borough councils could retain more control over the land dealing with a local society composed of mostly working men who may have been more apt to defer to the council on numerous issues. Finally, local councils were, according to the *VLCS* itself, “roused into action” by the determined and persistent borough citizens and not, it would seem, by outside organizations.<sup>205</sup> By the middle of 1917, the eastern boroughs had fully developed an allotments scheme that had turned the “worst possible sites... into promising gardens.”<sup>206</sup>

### **WARTIME ALLOTMENTS, 1917**

On March 3, 1917, the allotments advice column “Gardening Notes: Hints to Allotments Workers,” in the *Eastern Post* newspaper moved up from page six to page two.<sup>207</sup> The East End was under full cultivation with borough councils and allotments associations scrambling to locate any neglected pieces of land in the district to meet the demands of local residents. The position of the column in the local newspaper confirms that allotments had become a regular and essential part of life for East Enders. Even before the war, the eastern boroughs suffered food shortages; death by starvation had occurred about 25 times a year.<sup>208</sup> In 1914, people in East London were recorded stealing food; Julia Bush argues that even the old age pensioner had barely enough to feed himself.<sup>209</sup> Although allotments in London during the war were precipitated by a critical shortage of food, their increase in number was welcome and long-overdue in the poorest parts of the city. Certainly, by 1917 most people were gardening because of the direct and immediate need for food. Their participation was in many respects patriotic

---

<sup>205</sup> Butcher, 27.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> “Gardening Notes: Hints to Allotment Holders,” *Eastern Post* 3 March 1917.

<sup>208</sup> *Eastern Post* 5 May 1917.

<sup>209</sup> Bush, 13.

and was never short of praise from local officials. A Councillor Livingston from Stockton-on-Tees declared that he thought London's allotmenters'

...object is a most patriotic one, and I, for one, heartily wish you every success in your enterprise. I hail with much pleasure the great allotment movement in all our industrial centres. It will eventually lead to the creation of public opinion which will insist on a fuller utilization of our own home lands being drastically enforced.<sup>210</sup>

The Mayor of Wandsworth in early 1918 encouraged London's allotmenters with a quotation rooted in Christianity: "The first farmer was the first man, and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of the land."<sup>211</sup> This sentiment had always rung true for England's wealthier classes, but did so now also for those who had lost access to the land. Allotment gardening in the war did as much to bolster food supplies as it did to return to working class people a sense of Englishness and belonging. They had so long existed outside of what was deemed truly and historically "English" – that is the countryside, independence, and property – that, by gardening on a seemingly unassuming small plot, a sense of worth and nationalism was restored to them.<sup>212</sup>

As much as allotment gardening in the East End brought on these positive sensitivities, succeeding at keeping and maintaining a plot was not particularly easy. East Enders had much to contend with especially because many of them were inexperienced growers. Some plots were too deep, others not deep enough. Some too wet, and others too dry. Allotmenters dug through thick London clay soil to plant a garden having little horticultural familiarity with seeds, fertilization, insects, tools, and

---

<sup>210</sup> Allotments & Gardens January 1918.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> David Crouch, "Popular Culture and what we make of the Rural, with a Case Study of Village Allotments," *Journal of Rural Studies* 8(3) (1992), 230. Crouch says "Englishness" is "epitomized in its appropriation as a symbol of national identity."

weather patterns.<sup>213</sup> Yet, they were not deterred. East Enders took plots where they could get them, sometimes far from their homes, and succeeded in “not being behind the men of other boroughs” in their produce.<sup>214</sup> Gerald Butcher declared that the “war-time allotmentee is in deadly earnest; he is fired with the determination to stick to his little plot as long as possible.”<sup>215</sup> Some, however, succumbed to the hardships of working class life and lost or were denied plots; responsibility was an integral part of the allotments process and should a gardener not adhere to those standards he was unable to participate. A man named Joseph, a brewery labourer from south-east London, had his wife write to the *VLCS* asking for a plot promising he would behave himself and improve his ways upon receiving land:

I am righting[sic] to ask whether you will give my husband a peace[sic] of land not to[sic] far from here. My husband is upset becas[sic] you have got no plots for him. He wants to giv[sic] up the beer but cant[sic] and if you will give him a plot i no[sic] he will giv[sic] up the drink. I have fore[sic] children and a cripple and my husband to keep and so if I could have his wages instead of him paying it for drink we could be comferble[sic]. Please try and giv[sic] him an allotment as we used to have a garden when we came to London.<sup>216</sup>

There is no record of whether or not Joseph was given a plot; his case was not rare and indicates the tremendous desire poor Londoners had for access to even a small piece of land. Butcher also commented that East Enders had a “growing tendency” to eat more fruits and vegetables. He found one “true-born cockney” who reported his daily meal

---

<sup>213</sup> This is evidenced by reading the questions relating to the topics in the advice column “Gardening Notes” in the *Eastern Post*. However, many of the older allotmenters would have undoubtedly had growing experience from the pre-industrial days of the East End, from their days hops-picking in the summers, or from their original homes outside of the city.

<sup>214</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* October 1917; and *Eastern Post* 17 March 1917.

<sup>215</sup> Butcher, 64.

<sup>216</sup> Butcher, 38-9.

consisted of “bubble-an’-squeak for breakfast, vegetables-an’-gravy for dinner, for supper a couple o’ spuds crackling straight from the oven, and off to bed we go.”<sup>217</sup>

Determined to help their own families and their neighbors, allotment gardeners eased the burden of high food prices and shortages with dedication and perseverance. The *East London Advertiser* reported in April of 1917, in an article entitled “The Poor Pay Most,” that “food prices in the district have increased from 100 to 300 per cent, since the war and families, including growing children, are existing largely on bread, margarine, sausage meat and ‘suet’ puddings made of dripping.”<sup>218</sup> Aside from high prices, there was a genuine shortage of fresh food. In March of 1917, the *East London Advertiser* reported that a “potato famine” in Spitalfields caused a Mr. Ruane’s potato stand to be ransacked by 2,000 hungry East Enders:

In the Borough of Spitalfields markets on Friday last potatoes salesmen found themselves with empty stands faced by crowds of would-be purchasers. In both, and at Stratford market, many offers were made to defect the regulation price.... At the stand of Messrs James Ruane and Sons, Spitalfields, the following statement was made:- ‘We have no potatoes on sale, and you will not find any in the market. We grow potatoes, and succeeded in getting two trucks loads from Sutton Bridge to Stratford this morning.’ Directly it was known that Mr. Ruane was to sell potatoes, a crowd of about 2,000 people gathered round, and in their anxiety to buy they pushed Mr. Ruane and his rostrum over, and the police had to be called to the market.<sup>219</sup>

Later that month, a Mr. Frederick N. Charrington of the Great Assembly Hall, Mile End Road, delivered a letter regarding the severe shortage of potatoes in the East End to Lord Devonport. The letter confirmed the importance of potatoes in the diets of the working classes:

---

<sup>217</sup> Butcher, 66.

<sup>218</sup> “The Poor Pay Most,” *East London Advertiser* 7 April 1917.

<sup>219</sup> “East End Potato Famine,” *East London Advertiser* 13 March 1917.

As I have lived and worked amongst the poor of the East End for 47 years, I think I may speak with some authority on the matter of the peoples' food. For the well to do who are able to afford meat every day, potatoes are not a necessity, as other vegetables are even preferable for the use of meat. On the other hand, for the poor, numbers of whom only have meat on the table once a week, and for thousands of others who do not even have that, potatoes are a vital necessity. Potatoes with a little fat or dripping, is too often the only dinner that the children get.<sup>220</sup>

Borough councils were all well aware of the serious problem of food shortages and high prices so that, by the middle of 1917, they did everything in their power to secure as many potential allotment sites as possible for their residents. The Borough of Poplar was the most active of the eastern boroughs to supply war time allotments and also one of the first in London to adopt the scheme.

### **Borough of Poplar**

Allotment sites in Cubitt Town were places of intense social and political activity among allotment gardeners even before the passing of the 1916 Order. By 1917, Cubitt Town allotmenters were some of the keenest and best organized gardeners in the whole of the East End. They were gardening on more acres with every passing week so that between the newspapers and the borough council minutes, exact numbers are difficult to estimate. High demand forced the council to deal with the allotments issue almost daily in Poplar and to provide its residents with enough acreage to meet the applications. Once the council adopted a resolution to call for the formation of an allotment society and to transform 13 vacant acres in Cubitt Town and 20 additional acres elsewhere into allotments in January of 1917, the newspapers began reporting on

---

<sup>220</sup> "Potatoes for the East End," East London Advertiser 31 March 1917.

the number of active gardeners in the borough.<sup>221</sup> The following month the *East End News* was told that ground in Millwall would provide 200 men with allotments 30 yards long by 10 yards wide and that each acre would grow about £100 worth of vegetables each year.<sup>222</sup> By May of 1917, the borough recorded 196 plotholders gardened at Cubitt Town; one month later, the *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* newspaper estimated the number had decreased slightly to 181.<sup>223</sup> Slight decreases may indicate that some men joined up for the war effort and left their plots behind. This trend is clear in Bethnal Green where a significant number of allotmenters joined the HM Forces; their plots were cared for by other gardeners while they served their tours of duty.<sup>224</sup>

In February of 1917, *The East London Advertiser* for Stepney and Poplar launched its own allotments help column, “Notes for Allotment Holders,” and requested gardeners send in their questions. The local newspaper reported there were three areas abuzz with allotment activity in the borough: Cubitt Town, the old football ground in Millwall, and the “mud shoot” in the south of the Isle of Dogs.<sup>225</sup> Today, these green spaces continue to provide residents with access to the land; there is an active allotments community at the Mudchute Park presumably in the exact same vicinity as the wartime plots (Figs. 7 to 9). *The East London Observer* reported in January of 1917, that “Councillor Thorne drew attention to the value of the mud-shoot, on which, he said, 50 to 100 plots used to be cultivated. He thought that ground for 1000 applicants could be

---

<sup>221</sup> *Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 12 January 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>222</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>223</sup> *Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 11 May 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives; and “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* June 1917.

<sup>224</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Allotments & Gardens* November 1917.

<sup>225</sup> “Poplar and Allotments,” *East London Advertiser* 3 February 1917.



made available.”<sup>226</sup> Clearly, the Mudchute, as it is now spelled, had become a place of productivity and optimism in Poplar since its creation over 150 years ago when waste from the construction of the Millwall Dock was pumped eastward to form, what the charity that now runs it calls, a “wild habitat.”<sup>227</sup> The Mudchute and its allotments are perhaps the most poignant example of the power of natural space in the inner city. It was and continues to be an integral part of the community in the Isle of Dogs and for wartime allotmenters its promising soil fed hundreds if not thousands of families in desperate times.

The borough council in Poplar was in many respects the most encouraging and supportive administrative body in the East End. Its residents were among the poorest in the city and had been affected by urbanization and industrialization slightly longer than those in East Ham, West Ham, and Hackney. The council’s willingness to provide allotments rested in its desire to improve the lives of its residents and to empower them with the skills necessary to emerge from poverty largely by their own means. The council witnessed the great benefit of allotments late in the nineteenth century at McDougall’s site and the early plots at Cubitt Town, so that by the closing of the First World War, allotments were understood to be a valuable mechanism in decreasing poverty and maintaining stability in the community. In early 1917, the council let the wartime plots at Cubitt Town rent free and set up facilities to “obtain seed potatoes at reasonable rates.”<sup>228</sup> The council also reached out to its residents in the *East End News*

---

<sup>226</sup> “Land Cultivation in Poplar,” *East London Observer* 27 January 1917.

<sup>227</sup> See Mudchute Allotments’ Website at [<http://www.mudchute.org>]

<sup>228</sup> *Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 12 January 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

encouraging “all who are able to cultivate a plot” to “take this opportunity.”<sup>229</sup> The challenging condition of the land, its pollution, its hardness, and the sterility attributed to it by, “knownothings who declared that London... could not produce anything in the vegetable line,” also led the council to especially encourage the men of the district so they would not give up, lose faith, or quit their plots altogether.<sup>230</sup> Allotmenters at Millwall and Cubitt Town were congratulated for their work at a show in October of 1918.<sup>231</sup> In a visit from the Mayor and Mayoress of Poplar the summer before, the men were praised for “the wonderful change that had taken place in such a short time;” they then commended “the ploholders on their work in turning such an unpromising ground into a miniature Garden of Eden.”<sup>232</sup>

The local council aside, other sources of praise were easily found. The district newspapers cheered on the efforts of their local men; the *East End News* wished success to the Millwall allotmenters who they dubbed “a truly patriotic body.”<sup>233</sup> The *VLCS* spurred on its sponsored gardeners at Cubitt Town whose harvests were said to “silence the ‘enemy,’” being those who thought vacant London lots were incapable of producing food (Fig. 10).<sup>234</sup> The Society looked “forward to great things being done in Poplar,” so that with the support of the borough, the *VLCS*, and the press, allotmenters in the district were well looked after.<sup>235</sup> However, support did not come only from above; the Cubitt Town Allotment Society’s (*CTAS*) every member used “his best endeavors to make the movement a great success” so that the branch made “great progress in every

---

<sup>229</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>230</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* August 1917.

<sup>231</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Allotments & Gardens* October 1918.

<sup>232</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* August 1917.

<sup>233</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>234</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* August 1917.

<sup>235</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* June 1917.

way.”<sup>236</sup> Not only did the allotment holders in Poplar help themselves in the running of their site during the war period, but they worked so hard in several cases that they were able to donate vegetables and proceeds to local charities. In 1917, the allotmenters at Millwall and Cubitt Town donated £26 to the Police Orphanage and the next year contributed to the Poplar Hospital and the Parish Nursing Society.<sup>237</sup> This charitable spirit manifested itself in other cases throughout the East End as will be evidenced shortly.

Throughout 1918, allotment provision and cultivation in Poplar steadily gained momentum; in March, the Mudchute boasted 224 allotments while Millwall and Cubitt Town increased the number of their holdings by about 100.<sup>238</sup> Near the end of the war, the Isle of Dogs was said to have 6,000 working plots.<sup>239</sup> However, that estimation, put forth by the *VLCS*, seems excessive and is not reflected in the borough records. Most likely, the society exaggerated to promote its own interests and to sustain the air of excitement and enthusiasm that then surrounded allotment cultivation in London. We will turn now to Hackney where the borough council kept meticulous records of the location and number of plots; their enthusiasm was due in part to Councillor J.T. Mustard’s unwavering determination to bring allotments to Hackney’s residents.

### **Borough of Hackney**

If the Borough of Poplar was the most encouraging and supportive council when it came to its residents and allotments during the war, Hackney was by far the most

---

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Allotments & Gardens* October 1918.

<sup>238</sup> *Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 18 March 1918, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives; and “Branch News & Notes,” *Allotments & Gardens* July 1918.

<sup>239</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Allotments & Gardens* October 1918.

anxious to provide them in the first place and did so with more innovation than their neighbors to the south. In January of 1917, Councillor F.W. Poulton-Jones, Chairman of the Hackney Local Central Committee for War Savings, enquired of his fellow councilmen as to the status of allotment provision under the new 1916 Order. He asked, “what action the Borough Council proposes to take (if any) with reference to allotting small holdings within the Borough.”<sup>240</sup> Poulton-Jones further declared that “...one of the objects of his committee is to increase production, and it is therefore anxious to render all assistance in its power to the responsible authority.”<sup>241</sup> Not only were members of the council anxious to increase allotment provision after the passing of the Order, but so too were the keen residents of the borough. The local newspaper, the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, editorialized in early 1917 that there were “hundreds of people in the neighborhood who would only be too glad to have the offer of a piece of ground for this purpose.”<sup>242</sup> The author was “convinced that Hackney people [were] no less anxious to help the country to safeguard itself against a shortage of crops, and it is a source of satisfaction to find that the County Council... can count on the enthusiastic and whole-hearted co-operation of the Borough Council.”<sup>243</sup> With both residents and officials on board, Hackney’s commitment to allotment creation and cultivation during the war period began with full vigour.

By March 1917, the borough council had allotted all unoccupied land within their boundaries; the speed with which allotment sites were prepared and provided is in part a testament to the innovative measures the council took to ensure local residents’

---

<sup>240</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 11 January 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> “London Fields for Allotments?” Hackney and Kingsland Gazette 19 January 1917.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

demands were met.<sup>244</sup> The council considered allotting the backgardens of empty houses, public flower beds, burial grounds, and Hackney Common. It was decided that where areas were simply too small, they should be left as they were, that is, as viable green spaces in the borough for the enjoyment of all residents.<sup>245</sup> Later that year, Hackney debated whether or not to turn public recreation grounds into allotments. This was a contentious issue in all parts of the United Kingdom. It was argued by some that recreation, football, and other sports, were important aspects of working life and that, should they be taken away, the labouring classes would suffer from a lack of leisure opportunities essential to ease the monotony of their daily work (Fig. 11).<sup>246</sup> Those involved in the allotment movement, however, felt that due to the possibility and fear of food shortages, recreation grounds should at least in places be converted into allotments. In Hackney, the decision was made in November of 1917 to keep recreation grounds as they were stating the “importance of the places to the welfare of the whole community and especially to the poorer section of the community.”<sup>247</sup>

The decision in Hackney suggests several things about allotment cultivation more broadly in the East End. If councils felt the community was better served by keeping recreation grounds free of cultivation then it cannot be said that allotments were believed to benefit everyone. The decision suggests that the poorest members of the community may not have cultivated allotments. That the poorest people in the poorest urban community in the United Kingdom did not participate in the allotment movement, suggests several aspects of the character of the movement and its supporters.

---

<sup>244</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 March 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Bush, 20, 25.

<sup>247</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 November 1917, Hackney Archives.

Participation in the allotment movement required several skills and attributes that the poorest members of the working class lacked. First, was a degree of literacy, albeit basic, to read allotments notices, help columns, and correspondence; second, men needed to demonstrate a committed and determined attitude towards the difficulty of cultivation in London; third, there was a level of responsibility in caring for the plot that was intense and taken very seriously; fourth, physical strength was required in order to work at a paying job and then at the allotment site all in one day; and finally, in some cases, money enough to pay the yearly rent and buy tools, supplies, and seeds. So, while allotment schemes benefited some members of the working class, they were targeted to appeal to working men who found themselves in the middle or at the top strata of their class. The working class in the East End was collectively a unit with internal divisions; its members were not interchangeable.<sup>248</sup> The council's comments, however, failed to make fully evident in what ways allotments might have benefited the poorest people of Hackney and of the whole East End. Indeed, Hackney allotments holders were, as they were in Poplar, charitable members of the community. The Victoria Park Allotments Association "arranged for a collection of vegetables among the plotholders for wounded soldiers in Bethnal Green Military Hospital."<sup>249</sup> Allotment holders also acted as models of good behaviour, industriousness, and respectable working class masculinity. Their conduct and the success they found in their plots were surely sources of inspiration and optimism even to the badly off in the community.

---

<sup>248</sup> Bush, xvii. Although, Bush argues that East Enders reached a level of solidarity during the war because of such strained economic times as borough boundaries did not much matter; East Enders considered themselves East Enders before any other identity despite their differences in political outlooks and affiliations. Also see Cox, 136. Jane Cox says there were always tensions between the "poor and the not-so-poor" and that the "unskilled workers resented the skilled workers and the member of the Temperance Society despised the hard drinkers." This may have extended to resentment of allotment holders; the "respectable" may have resented the "rough" and vice versa.

<sup>249</sup> "Branch News & Notes," Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder December 1917.

Finally, any surpluses of their produce filtered down through various community channels to the poor and so they would have in some ways benefited from the scheme.

The initial 90 plot applications for five and a half acres in early 1917 turned into 4,328 allotments by the end of that year.<sup>250</sup> Hackney was nicknamed “Whackney” in jest for the large yields of potatoes and tomatoes its allotmenters grew.<sup>251</sup> In March of 1917, the *HDSAS* reported to the borough council that they had several hundred people waiting for plots; they quickly received the response they desired.<sup>252</sup> Hackney Council responded to the demand at Victoria Park where, in December 1917, they created 300 allotments and 5 new associations emerged.<sup>253</sup> Other sites created in 1917 included vacant land packages at Egerton Road, Leadale Road, Mount Pleasant Lane, Bakers Hill, Leaside Road, Mount Pleasant Road, Southwold Road, Gunton Road, Cleveleys Road, Devonshire Road, and Chatham Place.<sup>254</sup> The council handed over these vacant lands without much consideration suggesting they already had a well-established relationship with the *HDSAS* who had existed since 1909.<sup>255</sup> This working relationship allowed for easy land transfers and encouraged the borough to be co-operative in the provision of much needed allotments in 1917.

By February 1918, there was little debate over allotments being staked out on the Hackney Marsh as well as additional sites throughout the borough. Councillor J.T. Mustard urged his fellow councilmen throughout the war period to allot every piece of available open ground. *Allotments & Gardens* reported that February that there was

---

<sup>250</sup> *Borough of Hackney Council Minutes*, 29 November 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>251</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* October 1917.

<sup>252</sup> *Borough of Hackney Council Minutes*, 29 March 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>253</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* December 1917.

<sup>254</sup> *Borough of Hackney Council Minutes*, 25 January 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

“room for hard work at Hackney... with champions like Councillor J.T. Mustard and others” and that the “question of increased production of food is being tackled with commendable vigour.”<sup>256</sup> By 1918, Councillor Mustard had his wish. A year earlier, he wrote extensive editorials on the need for allotments in the East End and in particular for the residents of his borough. His passionate speeches and writings, such as the following, pressed his council to act and was a determining factor in the rapidity with which Hackney was allotted:

Many willing townsmen would gladly lend a hand if such land were readily accessible. In and around Hackney are many seekers after allotments who cannot get land, or have been offered such unsuitable plots that it would be decidedly non-economic to work such at present. The Central Unemployed Body for London in the past years has leveled much land which now will be suitable for allotments. There is one such piece of land in Springfield Park formerly used for grazing. Have we always to be told ‘Wait and see’ or ‘It’s too late? A better and good old British maxim is: ‘Take time by the forelock.’ Let the authorities see that no one in the coming months shall have cause to charge them with neglect in these critical and anxious times. When people ask for bread, they must not be given stones.<sup>257</sup>

Councillor Mustard’s relentless pursuit to increase allotments in Hackney in 1917 led to changes and intensifications in the scheme in 1918. In March of that year, the allotments at the Well Street Common were increased; by April, 700 to 800 additional plots were opened and the council transferred 13½ acres of land at the Hackney Marsh to the *HDSAS*; and by 1919, over 3,000 Hackney allotmenters representing over 4,000 plotheolders protested to keep their allotments permanent after the war.<sup>258</sup> However, as in Poplar, allotmenting had its difficulties.

---

<sup>256</sup> “What Allotment Societies are Doing,” *Allotments & Gardens* February 1918.

<sup>257</sup> “Letter from J.T. Mustard,” *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 4 March 1917.

<sup>258</sup> *Borough of Hackney Council Minutes*, 14 March 1918, Hackney Archives; and “What Allotment Societies are Doing,” *Allotments & Gardens* April 1918; and *Allotments & Gardens* August 1919.



Allotment growing was a challenging task for an inexperienced gardener especially on hard London soil. But in Hackney there were several other difficulties plottolders faced – a sulky councilman and greedy thieves. A Councillor Deacock never fully supported the allotment scheme in Hackney even during the war period. He felt that there was a danger in depleting seed potato stocks if the “individual,” as he referred to allotmenters, was given priority. Deacock believed allotment gardeners were not “legitimate growers” and that those producers would suffer from the implementation of the allotments scheme.<sup>259</sup> In spite of his concern, there was a sufficient supply of seed potatoes across London; the *LCC* ran a seed depot at Hackney Downs and Hackney Marsh throughout 1917 and allotmenters shared seeds when necessary.<sup>260</sup> Deacock’s resistance was at times condescending and arrogant. He teased about working a plot himself in a tone that was less than complementary.<sup>261</sup> With the rest of the borough council enthusiastic about the scheme, however, Deacock’s lack of interest was of little concern. Allotment thieves were a bigger problem.

Thieving was a serious concern for allotmenters in the East End especially during the more desperate war period. The *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* featured an article on the trouble in a May 1917 issue:

...in spite of the notices warning persons against trespass, a number of local allotment holders have already been the victims of thefts. Anyone who in these times will stoop to robbing his fellows of the means of providing food for himself and family must indeed be a mean and contemptible individual.... Ordinary fencing is certainly not a sufficient protection at night, and... policemen cannot be expected to keep a constant eye on the open spaces. The only alternative appears to be the formation of patrols, composed of the allotment holders themselves, who should take turns guarding the plots after nightfall. It is a shameful thing that such a step should be necessary, though it

---

<sup>259</sup> *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 12 January 1917.

<sup>260</sup> “Seed Potatoes,” London County Council Poster, no file number, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>261</sup> *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 12 January 1917.

would seem to be the one way of ensuring that they shall not be deprived... of the rewards of their labour.<sup>262</sup>

Not only did plotholders have to spend enormous amounts of time caring for their plots, they now had to guard them themselves. Vegetables were at risk as well as tool sheds, seeds, fencing, glass, metal materials, wood, clean water, and other supplies. Yet, people were never deterred or discouraged. Take Mr. G. Newman of 63 Grayhurst Road in London Fields, Hackney. Mr. Newman, a “sturdy old man,” proved that hard work in Hackney paid off and even grew him “sweets” and “desserts.”<sup>263</sup> The allotment holders in Hackney had just as much to contend with as their poorer neighbors to the south in Poplar and, like their fellow gardeners there, worked throughout the war period to ensure no one would go short of food in their communities.

### **Boroughs of East Ham and West Ham**

Allotmenters in East Ham and West Ham were so active in the allotments process that they were the force behind wartime provision in the two boroughs. This is not to say the borough councils of East Ham and West Ham were not keen to adopt the scheme, they were simply beaten in their efforts by their residents. The *GRSCAA* was one of the most active allotments association in the East End headed up by a Mr. B.V. Storr.<sup>264</sup> Mr. Storr was an avid letter writer whose requests of the council included better water connections at the Little Ilford allotments site, improved drainage at the Dersingham Avenue site, and increased plot provision at various other sites.<sup>265</sup> In 1916, the council failed to respond to Mr. Storr’s requests as quickly as he would have liked,

---

<sup>262</sup> “Allotment Thieves,” *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 2 May 1917.

<sup>263</sup> “The Art of Vegetables,” *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 10 January 1917.

<sup>264</sup> It is not clear whether or not Mr. B.V. Storr was the President or the Secretary of the *GRSCAA*; either way his position was important.

<sup>265</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, Public Health Committee, 13 March 1917; and Works Committee, 9 May 1916; and Minutes, 23 May 1916, all from Newham Archives.

but by early 1917, they accelerated their procedures to ensure the *GRSCAA* and the East Ham Allotments Holders' and Horticultural Association were supplied with enough seed and materials.<sup>266</sup> On several occasions, the council deferred decisions to the *GRSCAA* indicating either a certain level of trust or disinterestedness in the two bodies. For instance, in May of 1916, the council allowed the *GRSCAA* to use land free of charge and to "be at liberty" to erect fencing; in West Ham, the council then put other various associations in charge of sites at Prince Regent Lane, Beckton Road, New Barn Street, Memorial Estate, and Temple Mill Lane.<sup>267</sup> Allotment holders in West Ham held a "mass meeting" in July of 1917 and were similarly active members of their associations.<sup>268</sup> A horticultural show was held in April of 1918 in West Ham; presumably some of the many gardeners in Plaistow and Stratford who sent in their allotment questions to *Allotments & Gardens*, ranging from everything from crops from ashes to blood fertilizer, attended and competed at the show.<sup>269</sup> East Ham and West Ham's later urbanization and industrialization explains why allotmenters there were more active than their counterparts to the west. However, allotmenting in these boroughs was not without challenges; the land was said to be "very rough, unbroken, and in many cases rubbish heaps."<sup>270</sup>

After the passing of the 1916 Order, the borough council in East Ham actively called for plotheolders by advertising for applications on tramcars and in other public places. Several weeks later, the borough began receiving an increasing number of

---

<sup>266</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 16 January 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>267</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, 23 May 1916; and Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, throughout 1916 and 1917, both from Newham Archives.

<sup>268</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 12 July 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>269</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, 9 April 1918, Newham Archives.

<sup>270</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 12 July 1917, Newham Archives.

applications for plots, 46 by December 28, 1916. 76 additional plots were allotted in February of 1917 and by April a total of 942 plots had been staked out by the council, 346 by the *GRSCAA*, 80 by the *VLCS*, and 1034 by individuals or other associations. This was in addition to the 499 allotments already provided by the council.<sup>271</sup> January of 1917 brought the London and North West Railway Company on board when they agreed to allow “land adjoining their good depot at Upton Park” to be taken over by the council for the purpose of allotments.<sup>272</sup> That same month the council attempted to acquire land on the old Jewish cemetery; they had already secured 10 acres in the south section and now waited on the current owner’s decision.<sup>273</sup> There is no further record of whether or not this additional land package was granted. That January also saw the incorporation of the Gooseley Lane Recreation Ground for allotments.<sup>274</sup> Interestingly, there was little debate in East Ham about the use of this ground; the sustained connection to an agricultural way of life in the boroughs further east of the poorest parts of the East End helps to explain the quick decision to cultivate the ground. There was no argument, in the borough council records at least, about saving the ground for recreational purposes and in East Ham the conversion to allotments was believed to better benefit the whole of the community. The Borough of East Ham continued throughout 1917 to acquire land for allotments. In October, on behalf of their residents, the council’s allotments committee approached the *PLA* for an unused piece of land in New Beckton and well into 1918 the council was still acquiring land parcels.<sup>275</sup> There

---

<sup>271</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 17 April 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>272</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 16 January 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 1 October 1917, Newham Archives; and “What are Allotment Societies Doing,” Allotments & Gardens April 1918.

remains a large allotment site at Gooseley Lane presumably, like the Mudchute in the Isle of Dogs, in the same vicinity as the wartime plots indicating an unwavering desire for land in the East End that spans the last one hundred and fifty years.

The council in West Ham was somewhat more attentive to its residents' requests for allotments. West Ham possessed a long history of allotments dating back before 1836 when the *LFM* reported allotments of unsuitable land had earlier been allotted to labourers there. Still largely rural in character, this allotment community shared tools and other implements and were given "excellent advice" by the proprietor.<sup>276</sup> The parish's closeness to London was a concern, the city being referred to as "the great emporium of vice and wretchedness;" little did those labourers know they would soon be a part of the sprawling metropolis.<sup>277</sup> By the First World War, allotment sites were created at Lake House Road, Capel Road, Unicorn Site Church, Corporation Street, Terrace Road, Deany Road and Romford Road, Waghorn Road, Brickfields Vicarage Lane, the rear of 93 The Grove, 99 Boleyn Road, Settle Road and London Road, Cemetary Road, Adamson Road, Redriffe Road, Great Eastern Road, Baxter Road, Shipman Road, Berwick Road, Alnwick Road, Hollybush Street, the corner of Selsdon Road and Barking Road, and Connaught Garden Estate.<sup>278</sup> The large West Ham Park was also divided into five hundred allotments of 5 rods each by March of 1918.<sup>279</sup> The Park allotments had a long waiting list and, when two hundred and fifty plots were added that March, they were immediately filled by enthusiastic members of the

---

<sup>276</sup> "New Allotments, Parish of West Ham, Essex," Labourer's Friend Magazine October 1836.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, throughout 1917 and 1918, Newham Archives.

<sup>279</sup> One "rod" is equal to 25.29 square meters.

community again attesting to the people's ardent desire for plots in the district.<sup>280</sup> As was the case in East Ham, recreation grounds in West Ham were quickly allotted, specifically at Wanstead Flats and Canning Town Recreation Ground.<sup>281</sup> Evidently, the West Ham Council actively provided numerous allotments sites for its residents. In addition, the council was in communication with the Walthamstow Urban District Council to the north later in 1917 regarding the permanency of plots, a fight that was waged well after the peace in all parts of the East End by working class men who had become, perhaps without even knowing it, more effective urban citizens.<sup>282</sup>

---

<sup>280</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee 14 March 1918, Newham Archives.

<sup>281</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee 14 April 1918, Newham Archives.

<sup>282</sup> However, nothing came of the correspondence between the two Boroughs.

### CHAPTER THREE

*“Allotment Holders! This is the time to be up and doing. Your brothers are being evicted and others are under notice to quit. Their fight is your fight.... The more you help the less chance of the postman knocking at your door with a pre-emptory notice to ‘get off the earth.’”*

*Allotments & Gardens, May 1919*<sup>283</sup>

#### EFFECTIVE CITIZENS: BECOMING POLITICIZED

The kind of men involved in the allotments movement in the East End are not the types who usually feature prominently in histories of the working classes. Gill Davies has argued that the East End became a “region” in late nineteenth century writings, a place where “others” lived, where working class men were decidedly different creatures than their “metropolitan” middle class counterparts. These men were to be feared and avoided; they were a people with their own distinct culture, one that lay, for many, too close to the city and the centre of power.<sup>284</sup> Yet, a very different kind of man emerges from the sources on allotments in the eastern boroughs. He was a man who was happy, light-hearted, passionate, friendly and intelligent. East End allotmenters were men of diverse interests, goals, and experience. Some gardened for pleasure, others for immediate practical reasons like shortages of food and high market prices. Some were terribly poor, others found themselves at the top of the lower orders.

---

<sup>283</sup> *Allotments & Gardens*, May 1919.

<sup>284</sup> Gill Davies, “Foreign Bodies: Images of the London Working Class at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Literature and History* 14(1) (1988), 66-67.

There was no *one* typical allotmenteer in the East End and their characters varied greatly from borough to borough. For all of them though, their participation in the allotments movement drastically changed the level of their political activity. Under no other scheme were working class men able to fully participate in community planning and policy. Trade unions in the East End were never very successful bodies; this was due to the casual and diverse nature of the work in the area as well as poverty.<sup>285</sup> Allotments allowed working men to learn new skills, express their individuality, strengthen community bonds, and step out of the shadow of poverty that had long plagued them. David Crouch has said that “allotments can be useful in positioning ourselves in relation to the wider world and negotiating our relationship with it.”<sup>286</sup> This was particularly true for East End allotment holders who negotiated their position within their own communities, their local governments, their larger city governments, and their national government. This chapter will consider how East Enders gained a lasting political confidence and maturity by way of allotments in the post-war period in two respects: the process of their politicization and the new relationships they built with officials at all levels of government.

### **East End Allotments Associations**

The cultivation of allotments was first and foremost a self-help movement. Not only did East Enders practice self-help in the action of gardening, but also by becoming politically active they helped determine their community’s direction and future; this was achieved by belonging to an allotment association, which was the hub of all allotment

---

<sup>285</sup> Bush, 11-12.

<sup>286</sup> Crouch, *The Art of Allotments*, 2. Crouch also talks about this in his introduction to Michael Hyde’s book: *City Fields, Country Gardens: Allotment Essays* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1998), i. Crouch says Hyde had the ability in his allotments column in *The Guardian* to make similar connections.



activity across the United Kingdom but was especially significant in the East End. East End associations extended the democratic process to a largely disenfranchised population so that those interested in participating were able to do so.<sup>287</sup> Working men in the East End lived in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country.<sup>288</sup> Their poverty was further entrenched by the difficulties of living in an overcrowded, unsanitary, and polluted urban environment. Extremely high food prices during the war added to the already difficult life London's East Enders coped with in the early twentieth century. For them, participation in an allotments association was particularly meaningful and transforming. It was a community group that mixed leisure and politics, learning and improvement. At the same time, it offered members a piece of ground on which to ease the financial and emotional burden of feeding the family. Most importantly, the association gave the working man some power over both his and his community's affairs. By the end of the First World War, allotments associations had become fully functioning, self-sufficient, and completely autonomous grassroots political bodies with active memberships and efficient executives.

Allotments associations in the East End offered their members participation in a political process at many different levels. The member was free to choose how much or how little work he would perform for the association. However, the mere opportunity to participate is what was so innovative about the scheme. Allotments associations fostered many skills working class men would not have learned elsewhere aside from the trade union. The key functions of an association were to manage the allotments site(s), maintain membership and plotholder lists, write letters and run campaigns,

---

<sup>287</sup> Pennybacker, 4, 9. Also see Bush, 2. Julia Bush said of East Enders that they were "deprived of political self-expression and political motivation."

<sup>288</sup> Bush, 1.

organize protests, hold meetings, sponsor horticultural and legal lectures and seminars, manage funds, and elect the executive. Learning and perfecting these skills led working men to further politicization by regaining control over their affairs, participating in a democratic process, gaining voice and autonomy, building confidence with officials, advocating the community's needs, and expressing their individuality while working within a collective. Working class men were no longer liabilities to their community – they became pillars of it, assets in the truest sense. Allotments associations in the East End were so important because few other schemes offered so much opportunity for grassroots political involvement. Men's participation in these organizations benefited the whole community; working class women and children now had a voice in their more effective fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. As part of the self-help ethos of the allotments movement, working class people gained a foothold on their affairs. Frederick Impey wrote in 1886 of the “desire of men everywhere to have something beyond their labour to depend upon – to occupy land on their own accord.”<sup>289</sup> They had lost virtually all control over their affairs after industrialization and, together with the allotments themselves, the associations provided working class men with the possibility to again draw some power and wealth from the land.

Turning now to allotments associations in the four boroughs, we find that there were a variety of consistent practices and philosophies that all allotments associations in the East End adopted and refined. Gerald Butcher of the *VLCS* maintained that the most significant aspect of the allotments movement was “the democratic influence which it has exercised upon the minds of the people.”<sup>290</sup> Indeed, this democratic extension

---

<sup>289</sup> Impey, 7.

<sup>290</sup> Butcher, 32.

occurred in all areas of the East End. This was a widespread phenomenon derived from the simple act of participating in allotmenting. He also noted, “once a man is brought into direct contact with the land, a new vision immediately opens before him and he begins to think about many things that really matter.”<sup>291</sup> Expanding the mind was a process that occurred naturally from engaging in conversation with fellow plotheolders and attending allotments association meetings and lectures where interesting speakers might provide new insights into the condition of England’s working classes. Equally profound, was the patriotic urge to contribute to the war effort particularly by 1916 and the Cultivation of Lands Order. Butcher claimed that while patriotism was key to the vigour with which people picked up the spade in 1916, so too was their nostalgia for better times and a lost life on the land:

True patriotism, no doubt, induced many to take up the arduous and, occasionally, disconcerting task of cultivating allotments, but, while the motives of nearly all war-time allotmenters were prompted by a patriotic impulse, there is indisputable evidence to show that the movement which seeks to place amateurs in possession of land was really animated and made possible by the awakening of a long-latent land-hunger in the hearts of the people.<sup>292</sup>

Nostalgic and idyllic memories of easier times occurred frequently in the East End psyche precisely because life was so difficult and often unpleasant in comparison. I would argue though that during the First World War patriotism was most certainly the driving force behind the explosion in allotments cultivation in the East End. Butcher himself said that allotmenters, “recognizing the patriotic nature of their employment,

---

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, 32.

strenuously devoted their time either to office routine or to making out and allotting new plots.”<sup>293</sup>

Starting an allotments association was also quite standard and did not vary much from borough to borough. The first necessary component was securing a place to meet; in Poplar, Christ Church in Cubitt Town often opened its doors to the local associations.<sup>294</sup> The meeting would begin and prospective members elected their executive. This was the first of many democratic processes in which the plotholders engaged. Butcher strongly advised that if there was no association to join, gardeners should start one! Once formed, the association accepted applications for plots and began corresponding with the local borough council. They also ensured that the water supply was satisfactory and sometimes even provided tools to the plotholders.<sup>295</sup> After the association became a functioning body it could organize further meetings, lectures, and campaigns. The *VLCS* believed that “a well organized local allotment society is a social force of considerable influence in the district in which it operates.”<sup>296</sup> This was surely the case in the East End.

Before the war, allotmenters in Poplar had some experience with allotments associations at the early sites in the borough. John McDougall’s site in the Isle of Dogs was said to be “self-supporting;” there the tenants managed all of the affairs of their early allotments. They even held a large balance of £20 in their accounts.<sup>297</sup> As previously noted in Chapter Two, Poplar played host to many flower shows.

---

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>294</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>295</sup> Butcher, 63.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> East End News, 13 February 1894, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Allotments File No. 630-1.

Organizing these events involved some of the same kinds of work as allotments associations. In 1894, a Mr. John Ford, furnaceman at a local lead works, took on the task of organizing a flower show and carnival in Poplar.<sup>298</sup> Mr. Ford accepted applications for participation, which suggests on his part some degree of literacy. There was announcing to be done as well as carrying out the schedule of the day and organizing the competition categories. This skilled work would extend to hundreds more men once the allotments movement took full force in the eastern boroughs. It would take the First World War to bring the allotments opportunity to a wider populace. Poplar men were spurred on by patriotic enthusiasm: They were constantly reminded that it was their duty to help the food crisis; in doing so they would show they were a “responsible citizen.”<sup>299</sup> Not to participate implied to your community that you lacked the desire to improve, to your family that you were not overly concerned about their welfare, and to your council that you were content to sit idly by and let others work. The strength of this message was surely enough to convince some that getting an allotment meant doing their bit. However, to succeed in actually growing food, allotmenters in Poplar required a serious desire to work the land; without it, they would have given up in the first few days due to the difficulties they encountered as explained in Chapter Two. A mix of patriotism, economic uncertainty, council encouragement, and nostalgia for the land was the driving force behind working class men joining an allotments association during the period.

In early 1917, working class men in the borough of Poplar set about the task of forming allotments associations. In February, the borough council formed itself into an

---

<sup>298</sup> East End News, 20 June 1894; and 1901 UK Census for England and Wales.

<sup>299</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

allotment society they called the Poplar Borough Allotments Society.<sup>300</sup> This was only to be temporary though, for one week later the council held a meeting to call for the formation of an allotment society among its residents – they formed the Cubitt Town Allotments Society (CTAS) “on the spot.”<sup>301</sup> The name was later changed to the Millwall and Cubitt Town Allotments Association.<sup>302</sup> The Mayor chaired this inaugural meeting as a plea to the residents of the borough and offered advice to prospective ploholders; the advice would encourage those who were unsure about the possibility of growing food in London to apply for a plot.<sup>303</sup> That day the new association signed up nearly one hundred new ploholders “where Millwaller after Millwaller signed the necessary form and invested in some cheap and very informative literature showing how to get the maximum quantity of produce from a few square yards of ground.”<sup>304</sup> The *East End News* reported that the vigour with which the new society worked was most impressive: “It is... gratifying that the Borough Allotment Society, though born only a week or two ago, would appear to have become a most promising infant... its youthful enthusiasm has inspired quite a small army of Millwallers.”<sup>305</sup> The *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* newspaper also cheered on the men in Poplar. They reported that first meeting was “enthusiastic and inspiring.”<sup>306</sup> The paper also confirmed that the men

---

<sup>300</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 12 January 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>301</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>302</sup> I presume the Society becomes the Cubitt Town Allotments Society because the Poplar Borough Allotments Society is never referred to again. References to the Millwall and Cubitt Town Allotments Association and the Cubitt Town Allotment Society suggest they may have been one in the same and I will treat them as such. There is no evidence to suggest Millwall had a separate allotments society or that the Cubitt Town group acted independently of Millwall. They had previously associated in the Millwall and Cubitt Town Horticultural Society.

<sup>303</sup> “Allotments for Poplar”

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, March 1917.

elected a chairman, secretary, treasurer, and committee; the first decision was to secure the necessary fencing for the allotments sites under their auspices.

Within a matter of hours then, at least one hundred working class men participated in a democratic election, advocated for their community's need for food and proper allotments sites, and learned practical and theoretical horticultural knowledge to apply to their gardens. Few associations, societies, or clubs offered such a diversity of opportunities to working class men. As the months passed in 1917, allotment associations in Poplar continued to mature. In March, the association raised £8 for fencing and successfully requested a further £24 to complete their project. This negotiation with the borough council was professional and carefully calculated and shows working class men drawing on the literacy and mathematical skills required to engage in this kind of dialogue. No doubt, the council was an intimidating body even if it was the most encouraging of the eastern districts. Class conventions dictated that labourers existed lower down the social ranks than men with more refined skills. But by September, the association held meetings with and wrote letters to councilmen regarding rent increases on their allotments sites. By this time, the association's members had developed their negotiation skills agreeing to an increase as long as "no profit should accrue to the council, and the surplus, if any, should be applied for the benefit of the Allotment-holders or to Charities."<sup>307</sup> Covering all of their options, the association at the same time wrote to the *VLCS* to ensure they too would not charge an additional rental fee.<sup>308</sup> This shrewd ability to barter and negotiate was part of the working class

---

<sup>307</sup> *Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 4 September 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

culture in the East End; it only ripened under the stimulating and inspiring social conditions of the allotment association.

In Hackney, two allotment associations worked diligently throughout the war period. There is little evidence to suggest there were allotment associations in Hackney in the late nineteenth century. However, that is not to say they did not exist. The Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotment Society (*HDSAS*), formed in 1909, was, by the war period, quite politically mature. There is less evidence about the Springfield Park and Upper Clapton Allotment Holders' Association. What is clear though is that the two associations functioned in similar ways and had some of the same concerns. The *HDSAS* reported to the borough council throughout 1917 on the status of the applications for plots in the area, which indicates they kept accurate lists and records of rentals. The society had to carefully maintain these lists to ensure that those "several hundred" people waiting for plots would obtain an allotment as quickly as possible.<sup>309</sup> The Borough of Hackney recognized the "great energy" with which the *HDSAS* worked and accordingly treated them with respect and due diligence.<sup>310</sup> For the borough council to act without delay on issues from fencing to permanency shows a certain regard for the working class allotmenters of the district that most would not immediately expect. There was little air of paternalism between the borough council in Hackney and the allotments associations. On at least three separate occasions the council informed the *HDSAS* of their plans to spray for insects, to hire some of the men who worked in the borough's open spaces to offer instruction, and to inform their members that seed and

---

<sup>309</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 March 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>310</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 24 January 1918, Hackney Archives.



produce was being sold at the St. Thomas's burial ground site.<sup>311</sup> This relationship will be further explored later. For now, what is important to note is that the council created an environment in which the allotments associations were free to advocate for their members needs without fear of prejudice or delay.

Hackney associations were most interested in campaigning for the permanency of their plots. In November of 1917, the Chairman of the *HDSAS* addressed a letter to the Mayor of Hackney and to the *LCC* asking that, "where it might be found absolutely necessary to terminate the holding of an allotment, the provision of another allotment be carried out without question."<sup>312</sup> By the same time the following year, the Springfield association began petitioning the council for the permanency of their plots. They forcefully pleaded with the council and the *LCC* that "when the Prime Minister and others are urging all to increase production... [now] is not the time to stop producing wholesome reliable food."<sup>313</sup> Throughout Hackney, working class men involved in their allotment associations had gained enough confidence by 1918 that they were able to write quite aggressive letters asserting their particular community's needs. A Mr. T.W. Mole forwarded a copy of a Resolution from a meeting of South Hackney allotmenters asking that

the London County Council and the Hackney Borough Council... at once provide plots to meet the demand and is of the opinion that the plots should be sufficiently near applicants' homes so as to save time and labour... Further that the allotting of plots should be left to the Central Committees of Hackney who know the local needs.<sup>314</sup>

---

<sup>311</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 28 June 1917; and 29 March 1917; and 14 June 1917, all Hackney Archives.

<sup>312</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 November 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>313</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 24 September 1919, Hackney Archives.

<sup>314</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 14 March 1918, Hackney Archives.

It is important to note that these meetings were attended by thousands of people thus extending the democratic experience to a large portion of the working class population in Hackney. At a February 1918 meeting attended by over 1,500 people, it was “decided unanimously to form a central committee which will watch and further the interests of the allotment movement in the district.”<sup>315</sup>

The effort to secure allotments in Hackney was a well-oiled campaign led by working class men dedicated to improving the lives of their families and community. *Allotments and Gardens* reported in 1918 that, “the persistent campaign for increased food production in Hackney is attaining the success it deserves, thanks to the local enthusiasts.”<sup>316</sup> The effectiveness with which the *HDSAS* in particular functioned was due to its early inception, enthusiastic volunteers and executive, and its sheer numbers. Working class people had not forgotten the power of the threat of the “mob”<sup>317</sup> and strategically held huge meetings to send a message to officialdom. While they preferred to work peacefully and in an intelligent manner, they could always muster up strength in their numbers to advocate for their needs. It was this combination of factors that encouraged the Borough of Hackney to grant complete autonomy to the *HDSAS* by 1918.

In July 1918, the *HDSAS* boldly wrote to the council requesting full authority over their affairs. This was an unprecedented move and did not occur anywhere else in the East End. Most borough councils set up internal allotment committees; in Hackney this was called the Central Committee of Hackney Allotment Associations. It was from this committee the *HDSAS* wished to be liberated. The *HDSAS* asked to “resign their

---

<sup>315</sup> “What Allotment Societies are Doing,” *Allotments & Gardens*, February 1918.

<sup>316</sup> “What Allotment Societies are Doing,” *Allotments & Gardens*, April 1918.

<sup>317</sup> As defined by George Rudé in Thompson, 68.

connection” to the Central Committee primarily because the society had let and carried out the allotment provision on two key sites, Waterden Road and Homerton Road (Hackney Marsh).<sup>318</sup> The *HDSAS* also reminded the council they had spent £8 10s of their own funds on fencing; they respectfully asked whether the council “would be glad” to transfer to them full management of the two sites.<sup>319</sup> In an extraordinary move on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 1918, the Borough of Hackney granted full autonomy of the two sites to the *HDSAS* having full confidence the society would carry out the wishes of the council. Most other associations had to report to their respective councils as to all of their activities and decisions as noted earlier. The events in Hackney suggest the local government placed enough faith in the working-class society to grant them full autonomy. It is the best example, and the most significant, of working class politicization in the East End via the allotments movement.

In April 1918, *Allotments & Gardens* reported that there were “some hundreds of unorganized allotments holders” in East Ham.<sup>320</sup> The East Ham Allotment Association’s (*EHAA*) solution was to “rope” them in at “a large propaganda meeting.”<sup>321</sup> If, however, the East Ham association was short on numbers, it was not lacking in persistence and dedication. Allotmenters in East Ham and West Ham were some of the most persistent in the East End and, unlike their counterparts in Hackney, did not necessarily find strength in numbers. There is some evidence to suggest allotment associations had existed in East Ham and West Ham for some time before the war period. The first indication appears in the Borough of East Ham Council minutes

---

<sup>318</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, Report of the Works and Open Spaces Committee, 11 July 1918, Hackney Archives.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> “What Allotment Societies are Doing,” *Allotments & Gardens*, April 1918.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

for November 1915; there is a reference to a letter received from the *EHAA* offering to rent twenty-seven plots at the back of the East Ham Old Parish Church. The council recommended that the association contact the occupier of the land directly.<sup>322</sup> The quickness with which the council acted suggests they had dealt with the association on other matters in the past. The second indication is found in the Borough of West Ham council minutes. Throughout 1916 and 1917, the council in West Ham recorded that about two-dozen allotment sites in the borough were under the day-to-day management of the local associations.<sup>323</sup> This level of trust may have been established over a number of years in the area; it suggests the council had some knowledge of how the association worked and perhaps even knew its members. It may also indicate, as discussed further in the next section, a certain lack of interest on the part of the council.

Immediately following the passing of the 1916 Order, allotment associations in East Ham, including the Little Ilford Allotments Association and the Grantham Road Men's Social Club and Allotments Association (*GRSCAA*), set to work petitioning the local council to provide them with plots. These allotmenters knew their rights under the Order and were well-organized and efficient as early as December 1916. They had previously achieved positive results in their campaigns for better water and drainage under the leadership of Mr. B.V. Storr of the *GRSCAA*. Mr. Storr appears to have been active with the Little Ilford association as well.<sup>324</sup> However, it was not only Mr. Storr writing letters and petitions to the council; a Mr. G. Christopher wrote on behalf of the Flanders Road allotmenters regarding fencing in April 1917.<sup>325</sup> Seventy-two residents

---

<sup>322</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Parks Committee, 15 November 1915, Newham Archives.

<sup>323</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, see throughout 1916 and 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>324</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Public Health Committee, 13 March 1916, Newham Archives.

<sup>325</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 17 April 1917, Newham Archives.

of Manor Park in East Ham petitioned the council to take over Rectory Field, Little Ilford for allotment cultivation; knowing the local geography they felt the land was underdeveloped.<sup>326</sup> In March 1917, the *EHAA* requested that the council ensure that its employees holding allotments be granted their “usual Easter holidays in order that they may utilize the same for the purpose of cultivating allotments.”<sup>327</sup> All of these examples show a working-class population advocating for its community members’ needs in a variety of ways. The allotment association provided a vehicle for advocacy and gave East Enders a voice they had not previously exercised. Their effectiveness is evident in the council’s response to their demands; in May 1916, the council began a lengthy investigation into drainage problems at Dersingham Avenue on behalf of the *GRMAA*.<sup>328</sup> Also, in January 1917, at the request of the *EHAA*, the council provided eight tons of Scotch seed potatoes.<sup>329</sup> The confidence the allotment associations in East Ham and West Ham gained in 1916 and early 1917 influenced the level of their participation in the fight for permanency in 1918.

In December 1916, the *GRSCAA* offered to “act as the council’s agents” in setting up allotments on vacant borough lands.<sup>330</sup> Their initiative and dedication was maintained through to 1918 when it would be especially necessary. The West Ham Council Allotment Association (*WHCAA*) was as keen as their partner to the East, and as early as 1917, fought for the permanency of their plots. Their foresight in asking the council for 5-year tenancy grants in July of 1917 is remarkable.<sup>331</sup> No other association

---

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, 27 March 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>328</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, Works Committee, 16 May 1916, Newham Archives.

<sup>329</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, Allotments Committee, 16 January 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>330</sup> *Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*, 19 December 1916, Newham Archives.

<sup>331</sup> *Borough of West Ham Council Minutes*, Highways and Parks Committee, 12 July 1917, Newham Archives.

began their fight for permanency so early. The *WHCAA* had an active membership holding “mass meeting[s]” and sponsoring horticultural shows.<sup>332</sup> The East Ham and West Ham allotment associations answered the call of the *VLCS* who waged in 1917 that “It may be [the allotment holders who] are effecting a silent revolution on one of our acutest problems – that revolution of ideas which alone is calculated to advance the cause of Democracy.”<sup>333</sup> These men, described along with other London allotment holders as “a solid phalanx to protect and promote their interests,” did so earlier than the other East End boroughs.<sup>334</sup> Their politicization occurred slightly earlier in part because they had witnessed the vast urbanization their neighbors to the west had recently experienced and knew that their time to act had arrived. Politically confident and mature by 1918, the allotment associations in East Ham and West Ham acted without delay to secure access to the land they had worked to transform from vacant London wasteland to formidable vegetable gardens. The allotment site itself also helped to extend and enrich the process of political maturation working class men had experienced in their local associations.

### **The Allotment Site**

The allotment site provided East End men with further opportunities to develop their political awareness. Allotmenters learned how to manage land so that it was of benefit to the entire collective. While there was a “good-natured rivalry” between gardeners, the men had to learn how to work co-operatively not just individually.<sup>335</sup> For instance, tools were often held collectively and so planning a schedule for use and

---

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> “Southern Federation of Allotment Holders. Report of the Essex Hall Conference,” Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, November 1917.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Butcher, 44.

learning to fairly execute the rotation of tools and supplies was in itself an act of community bonding that forged stronger relationships between individuals. These relationships would presumably later translate into the willingness to advocate for the community on various other social and political issues. The *VLCS* was the most prominent advocate of the social and political benefits of allotmenting. After a conference in late 1917, the Society proclaimed that, “allotment cultivation is not looked at from the narrow material point of view, but from the standpoint of how much it is going to benefit our fellow-citizens – how much we are going to increase the welfare of others when we add to our own.”<sup>336</sup> Evidently, there was an element of moral responsibility to the community, both the local working-class community and the wider national identity, to work an allotment in the war period. Alternatively, working an allotment, especially one that sat on a vacant lot, was also a way to improve the esthetic of one’s neighborhood thus increasing community pride; the *CTAS* aimed to turn their site into “a beauty spot and a credit to the borough.”<sup>337</sup> Beautification was particularly significant for East End allotmenters because of the aesthetically deprived urban conditions in which they were forced to live. David Crouch has discussed the centrality of creative artistic individual expression on the allotment.<sup>338</sup> For East End men the opportunity to participate in a scheme that fostered creativity and individual expression helped them better define their cultural parameters and escape from the daily monotony of their paid work.

The physical act of gardening was in its essence a positive and healthy activity that strengthened working class men’s self-esteem. Allotmenters were said to be

---

<sup>336</sup> “Southern Federation of Allotment Holders. Report of the Essex Hall Conference.”

<sup>337</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder*, June 1917.

<sup>338</sup> Crouch, *The Art of Allotments*, 2.

“happily at work on... newly acquired garden plots” throughout London in the war period.<sup>339</sup> Furthermore, Londoners observed that, “many people who had hitherto taken no interest in the commons and parks... now love to doddle among the potatoes and the marrows.”<sup>340</sup> Certainly, working-class men had other opportunities to be physically active; they played football, cycled, swam, and danced. They walked in the local open spaces, and there is evidence they enjoyed cricket, boxing, and tennis.<sup>341</sup> It was the particular brand of physical activity that the allotment site offered that is noteworthy. The physical act of cultivating one’s own food as a member of the disadvantaged class created lasting intellectual results. By growing on an allotment, the East End man eased the emotional and financial burden of feeding his family. His physical labour, which was often described as arduous and unpleasant work as we have seen in Chapter Two, allowed him to regain some control over his financial affairs. This recovery of autonomy was a powerful force and led allotmenters to fight for the permanency of their plots later in 1918. In no other way did working class men in the East End of London draw power and wealth from the land. The small 10-rod plot returned to its worker a long-lost sense of self-sufficiency, self-worth, and pride.

Tending an allotment was no easy task and demanded a high level of responsibility and dedication. These were qualities that working men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continually had to prove to their middle class critics that they possessed. The allotment fostered responsibility among its participants – a quality essential to becoming a more politicized effective member of society.

---

<sup>339</sup> “Our Widening Horizons.”

<sup>340</sup> “The Fight for Permanency. Monster Petition to the LCC,” Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, November 1917.

<sup>341</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 14 March 1918, Newham Archives; and Bush, 20, 25.



Allotments tested the men who worked them; growing food in the polluted East End was difficult and so learning about horticulture and growing methods was essential. East Enders were advised that the best way to grow on an allotment was to first sketch out a plan for the plot; this “paper plan” ensured the allotmenters would make enough room for all the desired vegetables.<sup>342</sup> Horticultural knowledge and learning was one of the most significant ways in which working class men strengthened their literacy skills, the ability to expand their thinking, and participate in wider society.<sup>343</sup> Consequently, working an allotment was also an exercise in expressing and developing the image of respectable working-class masculinity. He was a man who learned, participated and worked hard without necessarily aspiring to leave his social position. His ability to provide for his family further earmarked him as a competent and respectable man. Indeed, the primary mark of rising to the middle class was a man’s ability to earn enough that his wife would not have to work.

John Wright wrote in an allotments manual in 1910 that as much as “by their knowledge, love, and industry” working class allotmenters made “themselves masters in the art of soil cultivation,” they still needed “sound guidance” in their gardening pursuits.<sup>344</sup> Horticultural lectures, seminars, reading, and advice engaged allotmenters in an educational process that helped develop all of the skills necessary to become more effective political citizens. Not only did the content of this information teach working class men about the land, plants, and science, it extended to include valuable knowledge about planning, finances, budgeting, project execution, and business. The *Eastern Post* printed an advice article in their allotments column about the value of planning:

---

<sup>342</sup> “Gardening Notes: Hints for Allotment Holders,” *Eastern Post*, 17 February 1917.

<sup>343</sup> Butcher, 47.

<sup>344</sup> Wright, John. *Garden Allotments* (Greening: One & All Gardening Books, 1910).

If food production in this country is going to be a real money-saving and money-making affair it must be done on a business-like system. Everyone taking over an allotment... should start from the beginning to reckon the cost. Every penny spent should be recorded... Haphazard food production may benefit the gardener and his family to a certain extent... but an allotment run purely on business lines, with all expenses and receipts balanced, is of value not only to the family but to the nation.<sup>345</sup>

The value of the skills endorsed by this East End paper are incalculable. Working class men were encouraged to improve their skills not only to raise their family from poverty but also to, as the article suggests, act as well-reasoned, literate, organized, and non-threatening members of wider society. Together with the skills learned in the allotment association, the act of gardening on an allotment and learning how to maximize that experience, cultivated a collective of individuals who improved their ability to voice concerns, participate in democratic functions, and advocate for their family, community, and culture.

### **Essential to the Scheme**

Allotmenters in the East End were drawn to the allotments movement not only because there was a shortage of food. As discussed in Chapter Two, there continued to exist a strong collective connection to the land. Gerald Butcher often spoke of the power of the relationship between allotmenters and their small bits of soil; he said there was an

indefinable sensation of satisfaction and restful contentment which the union of man and land alone can bring. There are those who might rub their eyes in astonishment at the picture of these men kneeling to thank the Creator for the wonderful things which spring... from the tiny seeds in the dead grey earth; but surely the companion picture of these men, poor, ill-clad, cut off from the main chance of human happiness, living and working day in, day out, in dull uninteresting surroundings, passing uncomplainingly from monotony to monotony – surely that is a picture far more astonishing and incredible.<sup>346</sup>

---

<sup>345</sup> “Gardening Notes: Hints for Allotment Holders,” Eastern Post, 17 February 1917.

<sup>346</sup> Butcher, 33-4.

While Butcher's words were evidently part of the *VLCS*'s propaganda, they did ring true for East Enders. The connection to land had been maintained through hops picking, flower shows, and the few but cherished open spaces in the four boroughs long before the arrival of allotments.<sup>347</sup> People believed in the *VLCS*'s contentions that there was "a sympathetic connection, and inherent kinship between man and the land; a link which generations of landless people have failed to break."<sup>348</sup> Not only had East Enders lost access to the land decades earlier through enclosure, but they had also lost the physical land itself through urban sprawl. This double loss had a profound effect on long-time residents of the area, especially in districts like Bow, Bromley-by-Bow, East Ham and West Ham who experienced large-scale urbanization later than areas closer the city of London's square mile.<sup>349</sup> East Enders were drawn to the allotments movement for very specific local reasons. Their experience of urban poverty and pollution further directed them to the allotments movement; it was the only substantial way to bring the country back to the city. Once the scheme was in place, East End allotmenters were essential to the success of the scheme.

East End allotmenters were informed by community needs and desires, the Cockney culture, local economic conditions, their borough's geography and urban locations, and most importantly, local knowledge. When they were not directly involved in an allotments scheme it generally failed. The best example is the South O'Kendon site in West Ham discussed in Chapter Two. South O'Kendon failed because the allotmenters there had no autonomy, and the local officials who initiated the

---

<sup>347</sup> For hops-picking see Pennybacker, 185.

<sup>348</sup> Butcher, 64.

<sup>349</sup> Bush, 1.

scheme possessed none of the local knowledge mentioned above. In this role, East End men became active effective members of their communities. They contributed both the manpower and the knowledge to successfully operate an allotment site. They became active in their affairs often for the first time. However, the concept of hard work was not new. Working class men already knew how to work hard and they were good at it – it was their livelihood. Allotment cultivation in the East End, especially where a vacant lot was transformed, was difficult and laborious work. One of the many reasons the scheme was so successful in the area was because of working class men’s ability to engage in this particular kind of labour. In addition to the working class work ethic, the Cockney culture of the East End further contributed to the success of the allotments movement there.

As we have seen, East End residents were strongly attached to place and locality. Hard as life was in the East End, the people who lived there made it their own and developed a very specific identity as discussed by Gill Davies and others.<sup>350</sup> Jane Cox’s and Alan Palmer’s work has reminded us that East Enders were proud of their working class heritage, were committed to preserving their identity and the areas in which they lived. They were committed to beautifying their surroundings as evidenced by the early flower shows and window boxes in the area and were equally committed to community needs as we have seen in their relentless pursuit for allotments after the passing of the 1916 Order.<sup>351</sup> This commitment to green space in the eastern boroughs should not initiate the immediate conclusion that East Enders participated in allotments to elevate

---

<sup>350</sup> Davies, 67.

<sup>351</sup> Impey, 7. Frederick Impey, as early as 1886, discussed the “enormous advantage” of allotments for the entire community.

themselves from working class life into middle class society. The desire to participate was, in fact, quite the opposite.

Allotments were a way to ensure that the Cockney culture survived and thrived in a variety of ways. The first was that allotments physically ensured that the next generation would survive and perhaps be even healthier than its predecessors. Children whose fathers worked an allotment were destined to be healthy by merely ingesting their fathers' produce. The second way in which allotments ensured the survival of the Cockney culture was that they allowed people to continue living in the area by providing enough food. Thus, people were not encouraged to move and leave the culture behind. Cockney culture was and still is intimately connected to place; it does not exist in its true form outside of the East End.<sup>352</sup> The third way the culture survived was that the allotment fed the labour market, and by the First World War, also fed the infantry. This ensured that the factories and docks stayed in the East End and provided constant employment. Fourth, the allotment site and the allotment association provided social spaces in which the culture could flourish with conversation, comradeship, debate, and healthy competition. The Cockney culture was expressed daily in the East End allotment movement by way of its participants. Finally, and most importantly, allotments, being intrinsically associated with poverty, belonged to the people. Poverty was the one thing working-class people in the East End intimately understood; it was their daily experience. So, the allotment, as an institution of poverty, was their domain. East Enders took ownership over the methods and the esthetics of the plot so that they essentially created a new working-class social space that was inherently linked to the

---

<sup>352</sup> Gillian Rose, "Imagining Poplar in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community," *Journal of Historical Geography* 16(4) (1990), 426; also see Pennybacker, 6. She talks of London as a city with "distinct parochialisms."

culture of poverty. The rickety-built sheds, the haphazardness of the rows, and the eclectic mix of plants and recyclable materials were expressions of the Cockney culture of poverty.

For all of these reasons, East Enders participated in the allotments movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; they may not have envisioned that their participation would translate into their becoming more effective citizens but they surely at first understood that the plot would improve their lives in a variety of ways. In 1920, Neville Chamberlain, MP and future Prime Minister, declared that, “every spadeful of manure dug, every fruit tree planted” converted a “potential revolutionary into a citizen.”<sup>353</sup> For East Enders, allotments had given them a vehicle in which to develop their political conscience without sacrificing their working class culture.

Simultaneously, as evidenced in Chamberlain’s words, working-class allotmenters, busy at work in their plots, were believed to ignore labour’s call to organize and threaten the middle and upper class hold on the nation’s political and economic landscape. Thus the scheme remained attractive to all of society. The relationship between allotmenters and officials changed over the course of the period under study directly because of the allotments movement and we will now turn to examining those new relationships.

### **NEW RELATIONSHIPS: COUNCILORS AND GARDENERS**

The nature of the relationships that developed between plot holders and borough councillors in the early twentieth century suggests that the allotments scheme in East London encouraged working class men to become active in local politics and enhance and practice the skills they learned in the association and on the plot. While these relationships differed slightly from borough to borough, they all provided working class

---

<sup>353</sup> in Davies

men with opportunities to connect with various levels of government on allotment issues ranging from permanency to theft protection. Few of these opportunities would have been possible without the allotments movement. The trade union in East London before 1918 was an unstable and weak institution. While the Dockers' Union had organized a large strike in 1889, their presence remained virtually unfelt in most areas of the East End.<sup>354</sup> This lack of unionism allowed for the possibility of the allotment association to thrive in the East End during the period. Other matters in the borough were addressed by residents from time to time as was necessary but the allotment scheme kept gardeners and councillors in constant contact. This consistency allowed for more profound relationships to form and develop over time; this is what was new about them and would prove to have lasting results.

In Poplar, allotmenters and councillors developed a relationship exhibiting the greatest degree of solidarity in the eastern boroughs; from the beginning, the council encouraged and advocated for its plot holders without question. In a recent article, Alan Johnson has identified the origins of many of the Poplar borough councillors from 1919 to 1925. He has found that the vast majority of local councillors had been long-time residents of the borough and were members of the working classes: "Stevedores and housewives, toolmakers and dock labourers, corn porters and railwaymen, labourers, postmen and engineers, ran the council chamber and the street protests."<sup>355</sup> This is critically important and, as Johnson suggests, narrowed the usual gap between working class resident and middle class administrator. Johnson describes the leadership of the

---

<sup>354</sup> Bush, 4, 10-12.

<sup>355</sup> Alan Johnson, "The Making of a Poor People's Movement: A Study in the Political Leadership of Poplarism, 1919-25," in Class Struggle and Social Welfare. Edited by Michael Lavalette and Gerry Mooney (London: New York Routledge, 2000), 102.

Poplar Council on various social issues as a “conversation rather than a lecture.”<sup>356</sup> By 1921, the borough council in Poplar had its residents’ needs at heart when it refused to submit its rates to the *LCC* over the policy of equalization of the poor rates. Rates were twice as high in Poplar as they were in the West End simply because of the high proportion of labouring poor in the East End; George Lansbury, MP said “the poor were paying for the poor.”<sup>357</sup> Known as the Poplar Rates Rebellion, six councillors were imprisoned over the affair.<sup>358</sup> Their actions confirm that the relationship I have identified for the allotments movement existed in other forms and was made possible by what Johnson calls a political leadership that was “organic to the Poplar working class.”<sup>359</sup> Finally, Johnson further explains, as have others, that the councillors in Poplar were in “active contact” with residents on labour issues and that in this context residents formed “an unusually active and participating electorate [who] came to political meetings of all kinds, were stirred by what they heard, raised their voices, were drawn in and consulted and, from time to time, were filled with excitement and a sense of purpose.”<sup>360</sup> Clearly, the people of Poplar were active in the administration of their affairs and the allotment movement provided them with a significant and valuable link to local government.

As early as 1910, there is evidence to suggest the local council was closely involved with allotments and horticulture in Poplar. The *East London Observer* reported in September of that year that the Mayor of Poplar “last Friday, opened the

---

<sup>356</sup> Ibid, 103; and see Bober, 139. Bober said the Poplar Council was “a truly left-wing, working-class body entirely radical in its aims and functions.”

<sup>357</sup> Johnson, 97.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>360</sup> As quoted in Ibid, 104.



second show held under the auspices of the Millwall and Cubitt Town Horticultural Society,” and he, along with the judges, “expressed genuine approval of the quality of the cauliflowers, onions, cabbages, carrots, beans, and beetroots that were exhibited.”<sup>361</sup> Naturally then, by 1917 the council was fully implementing the 1916 Order and spent a great deal of time setting up allotments in the borough to meet its residents’ needs. In January 1917, the General Purposes Committee, after lengthy deliberation on the opening of some of the first war-time allotments in Cubitt Town, decided to appoint an Executive Committee to carry out the proposals.<sup>362</sup> The prudence with which the council dealt with allotments points to a more general concern over the well-being of the residents and is early evidence of an emerging relationship between the plot holders and the councillors.

By the summer of 1917, the council was doing everything in its power not to increase allotment rents to cover costs. The motion to pass a rent for second year holders was withdrawn suggesting the council sympathized with the plot holders.<sup>363</sup> In September, the council minutes reveal one of the first meetings recorded between a councillor, in this case Councillor Thorne, and a group of allotment holders. The meeting was held to address allotment rents and was successful – the allotment holders agreed to pass the rent only because it would benefit the site and people were willing to pay.<sup>364</sup> Councillor Thorne’s attendance at the meeting gave allotmenters in Poplar the chance to directly engage in political dialogue with a member of the council. These

---

<sup>361</sup> “Cubitt Town Paradise.”

<sup>362</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 12 January 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>363</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 2 July 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>364</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 4 September 1917, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

meetings created significant bonds between the two groups that proved necessary once the threat of eviction loomed large in 1918.

At the Millwall Mudfield, the *PLA* operated 224 allotments and dealt directly with its members. However, in May 1918, the Authority approached the council on a fencing matter where it is recorded that the borough council would continue to act in a middleman role between the plot holders and the Authority.<sup>365</sup> The advocacy demonstrated on the part of the council indicates a relationship that acted to protect allotment holders' interests with other governing bodies and to help them better voice their concerns. It could be interpreted as a somewhat paternal relationship, or at least protective in some capacity, but I would argue that the council created a partnership with the plot holders in Poplar. The *CTAS* reported to the *VLCS* in June 1917, that they were "grateful to our local council and borough surveyor for the encouragement and financial help rendered by them" illustrating once again Poplar's dedication to the plot holders' work.<sup>366</sup> The Mayor continued to be supportive and kept true to his promise to "pay the allotments an official visit, dressed in state" of February 1917; on June 30<sup>th</sup> Mayor and Mayoress Warren visited the *CTAS*'s plots with considerable enjoyment.<sup>367</sup> The partnership between the council in Poplar and allotment holders is evidenced by the support, encouragement, and commitment described above and evokes friendly rather than paternal comparisons; there is no evidence the council dictated how the plot holders should run their sites, nor did they assume to be experts on allotments. They evidently stood in solidarity with them on all matters.

---

<sup>365</sup> Borough of Poplar Council Minutes, Report of the General Purposes Committee, 13 May 1918, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

<sup>366</sup> "Branch News & Notes," Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, June 1917.

<sup>367</sup> "Allotments for Poplar;" and "Branch News and Notes," Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, August 1917.

In Hackney, the relationship between allotmenters and councillors presents the best example of a borough council acting in an ambassadorial role with upper levels of government. The layered relationship in Hackney between plot holders, the borough council, the Board of Agriculture, and Parliament in Hackney deserves closer examination than in the other eastern boroughs, first because it was fully recorded and second because it was more dynamic. As we have already seen in Chapter Two, the borough council in Hackney recommended in early 1917 that the *LCC* immediately act under the provisions of the 1916 Order. We have also seen that the council established a solid working relationship with the *HDSAS* well before the war. The foremost explanation for the development of this meaningful and significant relationship is found in the constant contact back and forth between the council and the *HDSAS*. The society reported to the council throughout 1917 on the number of plots being staked out and let.<sup>368</sup> The *HDSAS* also requested council funding for fencing in March 1917 for which it was granted £25 as the council was “of the opinion that, as far as possible, it will be desirable to encourage and assist in this matter those who are cultivating land.”<sup>369</sup> For its part, the council informed the society of ongoing maintenance like the spraying of potatoes and of opportunities to learn horticultural skills from some of the men the borough employed in its parks.<sup>370</sup> By June 1917, the council asked the *HDSAS* to report

---

<sup>368</sup> See full quote: “We are informed by the Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotment Society, that practically the whole of the unoccupied land within this Borough, suitable for cultivation for the production of food, has now been dealt with by allotment, and that also a considerable area of the Hackney Marsh Open Space has been similarly appropriated, but that the Society still have a list of several hundred persons who have made application to them and are waiting for allotments.” Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 March 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> See full quote: “We find that there are in the employment of the Council, on work in connection with the maintenance of the Public Open Spaces vested in the Council, five or six men whose knowledge and experience are such as would enable them to give advice and instruction likely to be valuable to holders of small allotments taken for cultivation under the provisions of the Lands Cultivation Order, 1916.” The

on its behalf to the residents of the borough that the success of the allotments scheme in Hackney had resulted in the selling of cheaply priced vegetables at the St. Thomas's Burial Ground plots.<sup>371</sup> All of these examples suggest the relationship between the two groups was reciprocal and balanced. In Hackney, there is also little air of paternalism. Indeed, the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* reported in January 1917 that the borough council "heartily commended... the initiative and enthusiasm" the *HDSAS* displayed and referred all applications to the association.<sup>372</sup> Later, in early 1918, the Town Clerk talked of the "great energy" which the Hackney allotments associations "exhibited in furtherance of the interests of the interests of their members."<sup>373</sup> When we turn to the evidence from 1918 to 1920, the various layers of relationships between the allotment holders and local officials becomes clearer; the relationship-building done in 1917 allowed for the developments in the later period.

Still, the relationship between councillors and gardeners was not always free of difficulties. On the Hackney Marsh allotment site there was a period of some confusion in the middle of 1918 as to who was in charge of the collection of applications and rents revealing some tension over the *HDSAS*'s right to govern. The Borough Engineer and Surveyor first had an interview with the Chairman of the Central Committee of Hackney Allotments Associations where a decision was made to ensure tenants' plot rents were not increased or changed without their consent. This led to a discussion about the central committee's delegation of management to the *HDSAS*. The Secretary of the *HDSAS* had written to the Town Hall to sanction some changes that had been made by

---

Council then informs the *HDSAS*. Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 29 March 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>371</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 14 June 1917, Hackney Archives.

<sup>372</sup> Hackney and Kingsland Gazette, 24 January 1917.

<sup>373</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 24 January 1918, Hackney Archives.

the central committee without its members' consent; everyone who worked a plot with the *HDSAS* was required to become a member, which the council said was "not unreasonable bearing in mind the various advantages which the allotment holders secure at the general expense of the society."<sup>374</sup> The society had essentially taken matters into their own hands and circulated a letter amongst its large membership advising them to deal directly with their association and not with the central committee. The Secretary said he considered it more "businesslike" to not deal with a third party.<sup>375</sup> This incident reveals that while the *HDSAS* could rely on the borough to advocate for its members' needs as described above and again shortly below, it was never prepared to sacrifice its independence to ease the council's commitment to the 1916 Order. The society had reached a level of political maturity by 1918 that allowed it to make decisions like this that seem almost ungrateful to the council. Their maturation, however, did not change the strength of the relationship; the council fully supported the plot holders' bid for permanency throughout 1919 and nurtured their developing relationships with higher powers.

By late 1918, the *LCC* began putting into effect closing down orders for wartime plots. The land was destined for other uses and the wartime need for food was nearing its decline. Incensed allotmenters in Hackney, in February 1919, sent the council a copy of a deputation that they had sent to Members of Parliament for Hackney, Tottenham, and Walthamstow regarding the closing down of plots. This was the first of several large deputations sent to Parliament that the council supported on behalf of the allotment holders. By late September, Hackney Council received a letter from a Mr.

---

<sup>374</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 27 June 1918, Hackney Archives.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

S.W. Clifford of the Springfield Park and Upper Clapton Allotment Association asking that they receive a deputation. The association wanted the council to draw on its already established connection to the *LCC* to keep the local allotment sites open:

it was resolved to ask the Hackney Borough Council to receive a deputation of ratepayers next Wednesday to request them to use their good offices with the London County Council in order to get the Closing Down of Plots Order cancelled for the present in view of the serious loss of wholesome food that would result, also that such steps would be unfair to the patriotic men and women who sacrificed leisure, time and hard labour to produce food in the country's hour of need.<sup>376</sup>

Along with the support of the Borough of Bethnal Green to the south, the Borough of Hackney sent the plot holders' deputation to the Prime Minister, the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Minister of Food, the *LCC*, the local members of parliament, the Metropolitan Council (i.e. the City of London) and the other borough councils for their "endorsement and support."<sup>377</sup> The 1919 deputation represents the apex of the relationship between councillors and plot holders in Hackney. The language the council used to describe the work of the allotmenters is passionate and committed. It was resolved that because of the "continually" received letters and petitions from Hackney plot holders, the council supported "very seriously the urgent appeals" and the extension of the provisions of the 1916 Order.<sup>378</sup> The council had often been down to the plots to witness the success of the gardeners' hard work and because of this steady contact realized and maintained that the allotments "may in future prove to be an even

---

<sup>376</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 24 September 1919, Hackney Archives.

<sup>377</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 15 October 1919, Hackney Archives.

<sup>378</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, "Deputation," 15 October 1919, Hackney Archives.

greater benefit than... at the present time” and that it was desirable that they remain open until at least the spring of 1921.<sup>379</sup>

By their actions and words in their support of the deputations, the council in Hackney demonstrated a commitment to its residents and advocated on their behalf. They were willing to do this in part because they had for at least a decade developed a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship – the council benefited by having the full support of the electorate and peace in the borough and the plot holders benefited from the advocacy they found for their members in the council’s actions. By late 1920, the council’s support had translated into even further support for the allotment holders from above – the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries wrote to the Hackney Council to express its regard for the “encouragement of the allotment movement as a matter of urgent national importance, from the point of view of the increase of food, also for the social and political advantages.”<sup>380</sup>

Relationships in East Ham and West Ham were not entered upon with the same attention; plot holders there waited on the slow pace with which the council addressed their needs and concerns. In 1915, the borough council in East Ham received a letter from the Secretary of the *EHAA* offering to administer allotments on a Mr. J. Edwards’s land. The council without hesitation referred the Secretary to “the occupier of the farm with a view to his letting the land to them direct.”<sup>381</sup> By May 1916, the council responded to letters from Mr. B.V. Storr of the *GRSCAA* on various maintenance issues and recommended that the association be let land for free and “be at liberty to erect a

---

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Borough of Hackney Council Minutes, 16 November 1920, Hackney Archives.

<sup>381</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Parks Committee, 15 November 1915, Newham Archives.

fence.”<sup>382</sup> The council’s actions either suggest that they fully trusted the work of the allotment associations or that they were not particularly interested in allotments before the 1916 Order precipitated a higher level of concern. Either way, the borough’s actions at this early date point to a relationship that had yet to fully develop in contrast with Hackney and Poplar.

As in the other two boroughs, allotmenters in East Ham and West Ham were in constant contact with the council. However, the contact here never really “roused” the council into action as Gerald Butcher put it.<sup>383</sup> Both the *EHAA* and the *GRSCAA* urged the council to create allotments in the borough directly after the passing of the 1916 Order. The *GRSCAA* even offered to “act as the council’s agents with regard to letting allotments.”<sup>384</sup> But the associations were simply referred to another committee. Other instances point to a certain lack of concern among the councillors in these boroughs. While they do advocate for their residents on one occasion with the *PLA*, most requests are either flatly turned down or passed on to other committees.<sup>385</sup> In June 1918, the Aldershot Urban District Council asked the East Ham Borough Council to support a petition for permanency of plots that appealed to the Prime Minister, the Board of Agriculture and the Local Government Board.<sup>386</sup> East Ham took no action. In West Ham, a month earlier, the Walthamstow Urban District Council asked for similar support to petition the Government and propose an amendment to the Smallholding and Allotments Act of 1908 to keep plots open.<sup>387</sup> Again, the Council was unable to pass

---

<sup>382</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, 23 May 1916, Newham Archives.

<sup>383</sup> Butcher, 27.

<sup>384</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, 19 December 1916, Newham Archives.

<sup>385</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, Allotments Committee, 1 October 1917, Newham Archives.

<sup>386</sup> Borough of East Ham Council Minutes, 22 January 1918, Newham Archives.

<sup>387</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 9 May 1918, Newham Archives.



the same resolution. However, when the Board of Agriculture was directly involved, the council appears to have acted with more care. Having received a letter from the Board regarding an increase in the number of plots in April of 1918, the council in West Ham insisted that “everything possible” was being done to satisfy the residents’ demand.<sup>388</sup> We have seen that allotmenters in East Ham and West Ham were well-organized and active early in the fight for permanency. They may have been compelled to work harder for their rights than their counterparts in Hackney and Poplar because they were unsure of the council’s level of commitment to their needs.

The relationships identified above are significant for several reasons. First, and most importantly, they provided working-class men with a tangible political connection to government. These connections fostered a better appreciation for political activism in that working men in East London could see the results of their involvement. Second, class relations in the East End were never as strained internally as they were externally; that is tensions between members of one class were never as difficult as between members of two different classes. Nonetheless, working men were considered of a lower order than those on the councils. The relationships I have outlined here suggest the beginning of a change in class relations in East London at least in Poplar and Hackney. A diminished importance was placed on class as evidenced by the solidarity of the allotmenters and councillors in Poplar and the equally strong relationship in Hackney. I would argue that for East Ham and West Ham this was, however, not necessarily the case. Class, while it was still most certainly present, was not the most important category in which borough councils discussed allotment holders’ concerns.

---

<sup>388</sup> Borough of West Ham Council Minutes, Highways and Parks Committee, 11 April 1918, Newham Archives.

First and foremost was their attention to the direct and specific needs of the allotment community. Finally, working men's participation in allotment politics in the period studied reveals the maturation of their political conscience. When we consider the vigour with which allotmenters fought for the permanency of their plots after 1918, we can clearly see that the previous period of political growth allowed for a more articulate and informed campaign. Participation in allotments associations surely led men to voice their concerns on other local matters equipped with the knowledge and skills they had secured through allotments in the East End.

## CONCLUSION

*“I pointed out that it was hardly likely men and women would take food shortage quietly, especially if they had been prevented from producing wholesome food for their families.”*

*Councillor J.T. Mustard in  
Allotments & Gardens, 1919<sup>389</sup>*

The end of the First World War signaled the end of a dramatic chapter in the history of allotments in the East End. The war had created a situation that was favourable to the expansion of allotments in the area. East Londoners took advantage of that climate as evidenced by their participation in the scheme on a variety of levels. In 1918, the conditions under which allotments had flourished in the East End began to deteriorate and the movement was forced to go on the defensive. The political skills East End allotmenters had developed since the late nineteenth century were now put to the test. The post-war movement called for skills of resistance. In April of 1919, 3,000 allotmenters in Hackney organized a protest against the *LCC*'s plans to close down plots.<sup>390</sup> *Allotments & Gardens* reported that the *LCC*'s notice to quit had “raised a storm of protest” amongst East End allotmenters.<sup>391</sup> As early as July 1917, the *WHCAA* as we have seen began to worry about the permanency of their plots. Later that year, allotmenters in Hackney “were anxious to know how they stand with regard to

---

<sup>389</sup> *Allotments & Gardens*, August 1919.

<sup>390</sup> *Allotments & Gardens*, April 1919.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

the allotments after the war.”<sup>392</sup> The fight for the permanency of war-time plots is illustrative of the political growth of the working men who produced thousands of tons of food for their families and neighbours in London’s clay soil. Thanks to their resistance, allotments survived to this day in East London and can be seen by the rail traveler on the side of the train tracks or a by walking through the Mudchute Park.

Allotments were a part of my own East London family’s life throughout the twentieth century which gave me a personal interest in examining their history. Knowing that the East End of London was a major focal point of poverty in Britain and having the benefit of oral history in the form of family sources and memories, I felt that I had a certain unique qualification for understanding this study. When I began the historiographical review of allotment literature, I noticed that the story of East End allotments, and urban allotments more generally in Britain, was essentially unwritten. To work with blank pages presents several challenges. Neglected by the grand narrative of working-class history, allotments had previously been accorded no place in a historiography that privileged certain types of topics to the exclusion of others. Land, as a historical category, was not progressive; it was a step back from the Marxist worker’s march of progress. That grand narrative propelled workers as historical actors towards an inevitable revolutionary end, an end that, in Britain, was never reached. In that particular narrative, allotments were an awkward phenomenon that might even be viewed as obstacles to that end. What this thesis and other allotment histories try to achieve, is to demonstrate that in some cases looking back to the land with nostalgic memories was a progressive social action. Workers mobilized their concepts of the land for progressive purposes.

---

<sup>392</sup> “Branch News & Notes,” Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder, October 1918.

Before embarking on the research I did not expect to find such a rich history of wartime provision; I had initially planned on studying the period 1850 to 1900 but the relative density of sources, and the intensity of allotment development, directed my attention largely to the period immediately preceding and including the First World War. What I did know, was that the core assumption of this thesis would revolve around working-class allotmenters having maintained a relationship with the land that was nostalgic but at the same time rooted in and a result of their urban experience of poverty and war. I also knew that I would follow the lead of cultural historians like Gareth Stedman Jones and Raphael Samuel and write a working-class history that favoured a story of culture and politics rather than organized labour and politics. I assumed early on that East Enders' allotments existed within their own cultural parameters. In the end, the phenomenon of allotments in the First World War has proven to be as dynamic as I had hoped any study of East End allotments would.

The primary research was for the most part conducted in London. Each of the borough councils I visited kept exhaustive records of all of their business including minutes of general meetings and all committees. The British Newspaper Library at Colindale provided numerous allotments newspapers in addition to the borough newspapers and the larger East End newspapers. Most of the newspaper articles were collected for the period 1916-1918 because of time constraints. Other primary sources were collected at the British Library and at the London Metropolitan Archives. Central Government documents were not used due to their lack of specificity with reference to London. Finally, I visited the allotments at the Mudchute in the Isle of Dogs, Tower

Hamlets and provide three photographs to enhance the text; the photographs show the sharp contrast between the city and the country.

Although allotments have been so long neglected in scholarship, the ideological climate of social history has changed, particularly in Britain, in the last two decades, creating new conditions in which their legitimacy is finally being recognized. But to approach a neglected topic is not without its difficulties. While the excitement of working on a new topic carried me so far, I felt there was so much of this story that I was unable to tell within the parameters of a masters thesis. What I am most conscious of is the applicability of a gender analysis to the study of allotments. The allotment was largely a man's world where he was meant to feel valued and productive. Masculine self-esteem was central to working-class culture and was a widely accepted facet of daily life. The allotment was one way in which a man's self-esteem was improved and nurtured. A gendered history of the allotment is badly needed; it would also be useful to understand women's roles on the allotment, as well as family participation. In addition to gender, the history of allotments raises all sorts of other interesting historical questions such as notions of Englishness and belonging, race and eugenics, empire, regional specificity, and the propensity of certain trades to engage in cultivation and provision. A comprehensive study of allotments associations in England would also be an important contribution to the historiography. It would help us to better understand the social and political consequences of allotments for the people who worked them. What I have done here is to help build the foundation of a comprehensive allotments history. I have attempted to write a thesis that is not merely a local history, as much as I want the residents of the boroughs to be able to access the work; it is, after all, for and

about them. I envision that the thesis addresses larger questions and provides a framework for future urban studies of allotments and to consider how land, people, and politics intersect within subordinate communities in the struggle for voice, wealth, and power.

Allotments have never really meant to be seen; they aren't marked with any fancy signs and their invisibility has perhaps contributed to the neglect of their history. Allotments have largely been viewed as aesthetically unpleasing places until scholars like Crouch and Ward reminded us of the inherent beauty of their eccentric existence. Ironically, as they dwindle in number in the United Kingdom, allotments have in recent years become much more visible. The "green politics" of environmentalism has helped to increase their visibility. Allotment historians, myself included, want to show that allotments and the history of land was not just a matter for the upper classes, that it had implication at all levels of society. The allotment is the perfect place to demonstrate that the meaning of and attachment to land in Britain is far-reaching and ever-changing no matter how small the plot.



Fig 1. Britannia Gardens, Shoreditch, Hackney, 1937.





Fig. 2. 1832 map of the Isle of Dogs showing it was a marsh with virtually no housing or industrial development.

**The Millwall and Cubitt Town Horti-  
cultural Society. AUG. 23  
E.E.N. 1910**

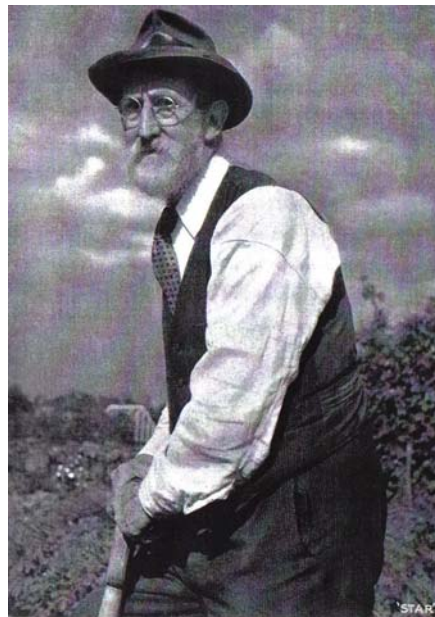
COMMITTEE:—J. Calder, J. Weston, and D. P. Graham (Hon. Sec. and Treas.)  
JUDGES:—R. F. Ford, F.R.H.S., K. Waddell, F.R.H.S., and J. Western, F.R.H.S.

— THE SECOND ANNUAL —  
**Exhibition of Vegetables,  
Flowers, and Plants**  
WILL BE HELD  
Next Friday & Saturday, August 26 & 27,  
— AT —  
**Christ Church Schools, Cubitt Town.**  
The Exhibition will be open to visitors on Friday  
afternoon at 3 o'clock; and officially at 6 o'clock by  
THE MAYOR OF POPLAR, Councillor R. R. BROWN, J.P.  
An excellent Programme of Music will be provided.  
**Admission, 3d. Each Day.**  
All entries for Competitions should be made to Mr. J.  
WESTERN, Supt. Island Gardens, who will answer  
enquiries, furnish Schedules and List of Prizes, &c.

Fig. 3. Example of the notice circulated for a flower show in the East End. *East End News*, 23 August 1910.



Fig. 4. Providence Place, Stepney, 1909. Note the window garden boxes in the upper windows of the homes.



A TYPICAL ALLOTMENT HOLDER  
appealing on behalf of the Unemployed Gardeners  
who are helping in a practical form of  
NATIONAL SERVICE

Fig. 5. “A Typical Allotment Holder,” a photograph of the Society of Friends Allotments Committee to encourage support for their programs. Note here though, the clean, respectable, hard-working look of the man.





Councillor  
Cunningham.

**Types of Unemployed Men at  
Triangle Camp,  
5 a.m., July 24, 1906.**

Organiser  
King.

Fig. 6. The Triangle Camp, West Ham, 1906.



Fig. 7. Photograph of the land at the Mudchute Allotments Site in the Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2004.



Fig. 8. Photograph of 3 allotments and their back sheds at the Mudchute Allotments Site in the Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2004.





Fig. 9. Photograph of the outside of the Mudchute Allotments Site in the Isle of Dogs, Borough of Tower Hamlets, with a view of London's financial district in the background, 2004.



A LONDON DESERT TAKEN OVER IN 1915.  
*It grew magnificent crops the same year.*

Fig. 10. Photograph taken by the VLCS as proof vacant London land could produce fine vegetables from rubble.





Fig. 11. "The Better Claim." The debate surrounding recreation and allotments raged throughout the war period; critics were unable to decide which was the superior activity for working class men.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Archives**

Hackney Archives

*Borough of Hackney Council Minutes*

*Reports of the Works and Open Spaces Committee*

London Metropolitan Archives

*London County Council Seed Poster, undated*

*London Photograph Collection*

*Register of Small Holdings and Allotments, 1889-1902*

*Volumes of Descriptive Pamphlets for Official Opening of London Parks*

Newham Archives

*Borough of East Ham Council Minutes*

*Borough of West Ham Council Minutes*

*Photograph Collection*

*Reports of the Allotments Committee, Borough of East Ham*

*Reports of the Highways and Parks Committee, Borough of West Ham*

*Reports of the Parks Committee, Borough of East Ham*

*Reports of the Public Health Committee, Borough of East Ham*

*Reports of the Works Committee, Borough of East Ham*

Tower Hamlets Local History Library

*Borough of Poplar Council Minutes*

*Reports of the General Purposes Committee, Borough of Poplar*

### **Census**

*1901 Census for England and Wales*

### **Maps**

British Library

*London Ordnance Survey Maps*

### **Newspapers & Periodicals**

*Allotments and Gardens*

*East End News*

*East London Advertiser*

*East London Observer*

*Eastern Post*

*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*

*Labourer's Friend Magazine*

*London Argus*  
*Metropolitan*  
*National Allotments Journal*  
*Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder*

### **Printed Primary Works**

Anonymous. *First Annual Report of the Voluntary Allotments Association*.  
Westminster, 1887.

Butcher, Gerald W. *Allotments for All: The Story of a Great Movement*. London:  
Allen & Unwin, 1918.

Fortescue, Earl, "Poor Men's Gardens," *The Nineteenth Century* 23 (March 1888): 394-  
402.

Green, Sir John Little. *Allotments and Small Holdings*. London: Swan Sonnenschein  
& Co., 1896.

Impey, Frederick. '*Housed Beggars*,' or *The Right of the Labourer to Allotments and*  
*Small Holdings*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1886.

*Keeping Fit by Allotment Digging: Annual Report of the Society of Friends Allotments*  
*Committee and Central Allotments Committee, September 1936-August 1937*.  
London: 1937.

Little, James Brooke. *The Law of Allotments for the Poor; Together with the*  
*Incorporated Statutes*. London: Shaw & Sons, 1887.

Winfrey, Sir Richard. *Address on Allotments and Small Holdings*. London: Political  
Committee of the National Liberal Club, 1907.

Wright, John. *Garden Allotments*. One & All Garden Books, no. 27, 1910.

### **Secondary Sources**

Allison, K.J., "The Provision of Allotment Gardens in East Yorkshire," *Northern*  
*History* 37 (2000): 275-292.

Archer, John E., "The Nineteenth-Century Allotment: Half and Acre and a Row,"  
*Economic History Review* 50(1) (1997): 21-36.

Barnett, D.C., "Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty, 1780-1840," in *Land,*  
*Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution. Essays Presented to J.D.*  
*Chambers*. Edited by E.L. Jones and G.E. Mingay. London: Edward Arnold,  
1967: 162-183.



- Bellows, Anne C., "One Hundred Years of Allotment Gardens in Poland," *Food & Foodways* 12(4) (2004): 247-76.
- Bober, Philip P., "Rate Capping and 'Poplarism,'" *Contemporary Review* 249(1448) (1986): 139-141.
- Bronstein, Jamie, "The Homestead and the Garden Plot: Cultural Pressures on Land Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the USA," *The European Legacy* 6 (2) (2001): 159-75.
- . *Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Burchardt, Jeremy. *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873*. London: Royal Historical Society, 2002.
- , "Land, Labour, and Politics: Parliament and Allotment Provision, 1830-1870," in *Agriculture and Politics in England, 1815-1939*, edited by J.R. Wordie. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000.
- , *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England Since 1800*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
- , "Rural Social Relations, 1830-50: Opposition to Allotments for Labourers," *Agricultural History Review* 45 (2) (1997): 165-75.
- Bush, Julia. *Behind the Lines: East London Labour 1914-1919*. London: Merlin Press, 1984.
- Chase, Malcolm. *'The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988
- , "We Wish Only to Work for Ourselves: The Chartist Land Plan," in *Learning and Living: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*. Edited by M. Chase and I. Dyck. Aldershot: 1996.
- , "Wholesome Object Lessons: The Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect," *English Historical Review* 118(475) (2003): 59-85.
- Constantine, Stephen, "Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries," *Journal of Social History* 14(3) (1981): 387-406.
- Council of the London Borough of Newham. *West Ham 1886-1986: A Volume to Commemorate the Centenary of the Incorporation of West Ham as a Municipal Borough in 1886*. London: The Plaistow Press, 1986.

- Cox, Jane. *London's East End Life and Traditions*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994.
- Crouch, David & Colin Ward. *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture*. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1997.
- Crouch, David. *The Art of Allotments*. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2003.
- , "Popular Culture and what we make of the Rural, with a Case Study of Village Allotments," *Journal of Rural Studies* 8(3) (1992): 229-347.
- Daniels, S.J., "The Garden: A Celebration of One Thousand Years of British Gardening," *The London Journal* 5(2) (1979): 307-310.
- Davies, Gill, "Foreign Bodies: Images of the London Working Class at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," *Literature and History* 14(1) (1988): 64-80.
- Davis, John, "London Government 1850-1920: The Metropolitan Board of Works and the London County Council," *The London Journal* 26(1) (2001): 47-56.
- Douglas, Roy. *Land, People, and Politics*. London: Allison & Busby, 1976.
- Ducker, Kevin, "Growing Pains: Allotment Gardening and the East End," *Riding East: The Journal of East London Studies* 4(3): 65-85.
- Flavell, N., "Urban Allotment Gardens in the Eighteenth Century: The Case of Sheffield," *Agricultural History Review* 51(1) (2003): 95-106.
- Garnett, Tara, "Urban Agriculture in London: Rethinking our Food Economy," in *Growing Cities, Growing Food*. Edited by Bakker et al. Feldafing: Deutsche Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung, 2000.
- Gaskell, S. Martin, "Gardens for the Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure," *Victorian Studies* 23(4) (1980): 479-501.
- Gould, P.C. *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain, 1880-1900*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988.
- Harvey, A.D., "London Boroughs," *History Today* 49(7) (July 1999): 15-17.
- Horne, Thomas. *Property Rights and Poverty: Political Argument in Britain, 1605-1834*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Hyde, Michael. *City Fields, Country Gardens: Allotment Essays*. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1998.

- Johnson, Alan, "The Making of a Poor People's Movement: A Study in the Political Leadership of Poplarism, 1919-25," in *Class Struggle and Social Welfare*. Edited by Michael Lavalette and Gerry Mooney. London: New York Routledge, 2000.
- Lowe, Brigid, "Gardens in Hackney," *Journal of Garden History* 26(1) (1998): 19-30.
- MacLean, Gerald, Donna Landry, and Joseph Ward, eds. *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Malchow, H.L., "Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* 29 (1) (Autumn 1985): 97-124.
- McClelland, Keith, "Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850-1867," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*. Edited by Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Miller, Simon, "Urban Dreams and Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920-45," *Rural History* 6(1) (1995): 89-102.
- Moran, Denis M. *The Allotment Movement in Britain*. American University Series, Series XXV, Geography, Volume 1. Peter Lang Pub Inc., 1990.
- Moselle, Boaz, "Allotments, Enclosure, and Proletarianization in Early Nineteenth-Century Southern England," *Economic History Review* 68(3) (1995): 482-500.
- Palmer, Alan. *The East End: Four Centuries of London Life*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Pennybacker, Susan. *A Vision for London 1889-1914: Labour, Everyday Life and the LCC Experiment*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Rose, Gillian, "Imagining Poplar in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community," *Journal of Historical Geography* 16(4) (1990): 425-437.
- Roy, Marlene. *The Rhetoric and Reality of Allotment Gardens and Sustainable Development: The Case of Allotment Gardens in Winnipeg, Manitoba*. M.A. Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Manitoba, 2001.
- Searby, P., "Great Dodford and the Later History of the Chartist Land Scheme," *Agricultural History Review* 16(1) (1968): 32-45.

Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

Thorpe, Harry, "The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use," *Geography* 60(3) (1975): 169-183.

Wale, Michael, "Digging For Victory," *The Ecologist* 31(2) (March 2001): 54-5.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.